



# FAR POINT

Issue No. 1 – November/December 1991

The Science Fiction and Fantasy Magazine

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# FAR POINT

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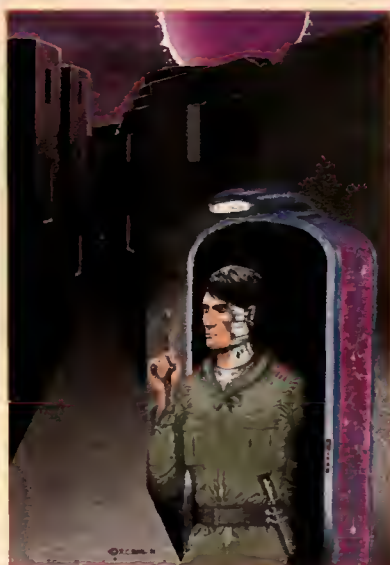
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## THE ARTISTS

The illustrations accompanying these stories are provided by three artists. Our cover star, who also produced the centre spread and the colour plate for *The Firing Line*, is Keith Page. Sarah Bradnam illustrated *Conspiracy of Souls*, *The Crow and The Dragonfly* and *The Door Specialist*. The pictures for *Adam's Offspring* and *Do You Love* were the work of Roy Courtenay-Deal. My thanks to all of them.

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# VIEW POINT

Why another SF and Fantasy magazine? What is there about FAR POINT that we think justifies your £1.95? Well, plainly we think there's space for a volume-production SF & F periodical in the market, among the thousands of titles vying for your attention. Whether you spend your leisure time morris dancing, modelling railways or motorcycling, cooking or caving, fishing, film-going or philatelistising, your enthusiasm is well catered for, probably with dozens of magazines. But SF and Fantasy?

Sure, there are the review magazines, particularly for those of us who like our SF on TV or film. There are small and large press titles (that's 'large press' in terms of the SF & F periodical market, which is pretty small beer compared with, say, Women's magazines)-titles which mix their reviews with fiction, and there are excellent small press magazines which cover fiction alone. So, what's different about this offering?

Just this. This is primarily a fiction magazine, so we aim to bring you the broadest possible spread of quality fiction every issue. And that fiction will be backed with the very best mono and colour artwork we can find, EVERY issue. What's more, we don't have an axe to grind about sub-genres or styles; Fantasy will appear as frequently as SF. Warlocks and starship pilots, thieves, princesses and aliens, computer programs, AIs and youths on quests will come brawling through these pages every time you pick up a copy. This, after all, only reflects what we see on the bookshelves; however, while fantasy appears in the fast-seller and best-seller lists more often than does SF, we are going to remain true to our masthead claim to include both.

What are we going to publish? Well, has anyone else noticed the absence of fun and enjoyment from

SF and Fantasy magazines these days? The genre (or genres) we all call SF and Fantasy are surely nothing without that sense of marvel, of wonder. But in recent years that wonder seems to have been replaced in the British magazine scene with a kind of angst-ridden inspection of the collective navel. With a few noble exceptions, it seems that you can't open a magazine these days without falling over someone telling us what we ought to be reading, if not actually berating us- and, presumably, the authors- for daring to enjoy space fiction, sword-and-sorcery, cyberpunk or whatever. SF has to be serious.

Well, sorry; but that's not for us. At FAR POINT we enjoy our SF, and we hope you're going to enjoy it too. Certainly, the genre must deal with the important issues, or else it's just froth, and there's a noble tradition of authors tackling humanity's nastier demons long before the mainstream acknowledges their existence. But dammit! It's not unreasonable to want to be entertained as well as informed, or to look for a bit of mental stimulation among the dire warnings. And that's not just sugar-coating the pill.

Finally, it's historically difficult for a new writer to break in to the SF and Fantasy market. You have to cut your teeth on something a bit easier than The Great SF Novel (unless you're truly remarkable), and learn the craft of writing the complex and demanding disciplines of short fiction. So FAR POINT will always feature complete novices and relative newcomers among the better known and established names. This inevitably means that we will be taking some risks and making some guesses. You may not like everything that you see among these pages, but I'm confident that you'll always find something to enjoy.

*Charlie Rigby*

## SUBMISSIONS

We always want to see new material, whether stories or illustrations. Stories should be less than 6,000 words long, typed or "final" quality word-processed. Please don't send hundreds all in one go: one will do! Keep a copy of the MS, and include your name and address on it as well as on any accompanying letter. Unsolicited artwork should be for front cover or centre spread only, or samples to show your style. Don't send originals; colour photocopies, transparencies or polaroids, etc, are far safer in the post. Return postage is essential, for acknowledgement and for return of MS. In all cases, please be prepared to wait at least two months for a decision, although we'll acknowledge receipt pretty quickly.



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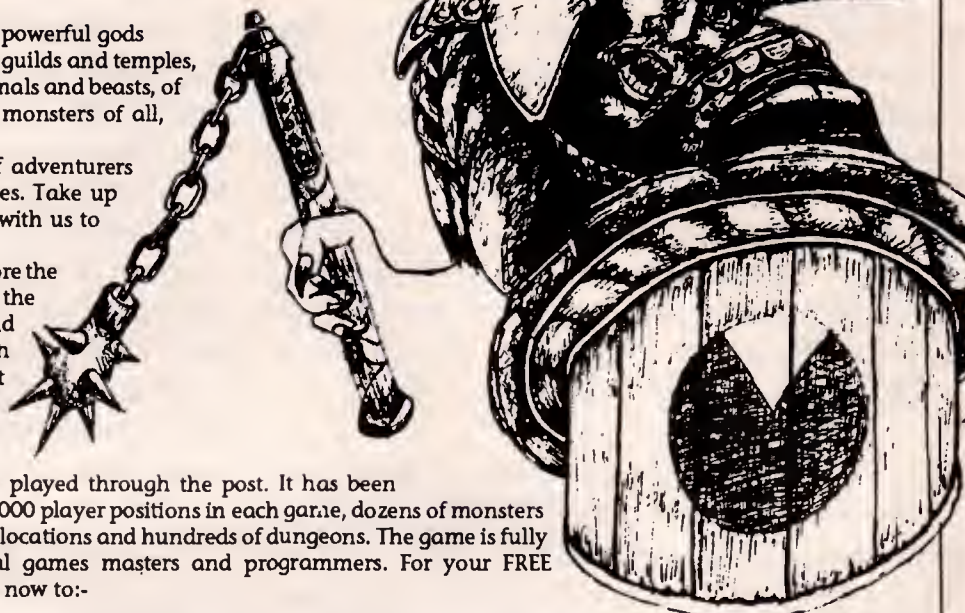
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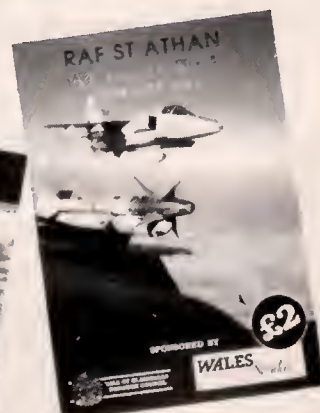
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# Home is a House called Percy

by Stephen Markley

*Percy reminded Sheena Resnick of a sugarloaf house from a fairy tale. There wasn't a straight line anywhere on him...*

His walls bowed and were covered in some kind of tan hide giving them the colour of lightly baked bread while the four round windows looked as though they'd been pressed out of dough. On top of it all rested a thatched roof which she remembered from the brochure had been developed from camel hair. This material, the brochure had boasted was tougher and more weatherproof than tile and could be grown back in the event of damage.

Percy stood in his own grounds in a row of sugarloaf houses. Behind him, butterflies chased each other in a small pasture. Beyond the few oaks at the far side of the pasture, stood another row of sugarloaf houses.

"The DNA for the house has been chopped and spliced from all over but everything you see in the garden is original gene stock, the nasturtiums, the carnations, the lupins, the lot."

The flowerbeds flamed with colour, like pools of rainbow. Sheena took Sammy by the hand and led him onto the lawn and walked with him around the beds. The Let Officer followed behind.

"It's beautiful," Sheena said, wishing she was better with words.

"The flowers and the vegetables at the back form the house's waste disposal system. The house's biological processes convert all waste material into nutrients which the plants then absorb. No leaky plumbing, no rubbish dumps or sewage disposal." The Let Officer looked pleased with himself.

"Sammy, you stop that." Sheena tugged Sammy's arm to stop him pulling the heads off carnations.

The Let Officer forced a smile. "You have five children, then?"

"Yes, the others are at Daycare. This one had to go to the dentist, so I brought him along as a treat." Sheena smiled at the Let Officer. "He was very brave." The Let Officer smiled.

"Show your new tooth, Sammy."

Sammy curled into an embarrassed ball at his mother's feet. Sheena laughed.

The Let Officer smiled harder and ushered them back to the path.

"You see how these paving stones gradually taper down as they run from the house down to the gate?"

"I see it."

"Well, that's because the path isn't stone at all. It's a specially extended tailbone, winding down from the house."

"Good God", said Sheena.

They moved up the path towards the house with Sammy jumping from vertebra to vertebra on both feet. She thought of the little hole they were living in now and without even looking inside knew that she wanted it. She realised she would do anything to get it. She surprised herself. She was aware men still desired her but she'd never thought of herself as that kind of person. She smoothed her black skirt and looked the Let Officer over. With his bulging forehead and sneaky little eyes, he didn't look the type either - but you

never knew.

The Let Officer took them to a puckering in the wall between the downstairs windows.

"Open up, Percy."

Two thick lips rolled back, exposing a fleshy portal into the house. Despite herself, Sheena recoiled. It was like looking into a monstrous gullet. "I wanna go home, Mummy." Sammy clung to her.

"Percy gets to know your voice and scent and won't open up to anyone else. You can teach him a different command too, if you prefer, but we don't recommend it. He isn't that bright and you risk confusing him."

The Let Officer stepped into the glistening pink passageway. Sheena picked up Sammy and followed him in. The passageway was hard beneath her feet, not quite what she expected. The air smelled moist and floral with a disquieting taint of animal biology underneath. A home is a home, she told herself, and that was more than they had now.

The Let Officer took them into the living room where they stood in the centre of a white-bone floor that curved gently down towards the corners. Sheena put Sammy down and he clung to her skirt.

"The foundation of the house is basically Percy's Pelvic girdle, which encloses the bulk of his nervous system, while the ribs form the support for the upper floor."

He walked to the wall and thumped it. It emitted a wet thud.

"Nothing remotely like Percy has ever lived before, although he does have many relations in the animal and plant kingdoms."

A note of pride crept into his voice.

"The bulk of his genes were derived from the genus *Bos*." He must have read her expression. "But he's got DNA from all sorts of unexpected quarters, including some plant ones which allow him to photosynthesise up on the roof. There's even a touch of shark in there - his digestive juices can break down steel. It's no exaggeration to say he promises to absolutely obliterate the housing shortage. He's been genengineered for rapid gestation and one pair of houses can produce ten offspring in a year."

It all sounded familiar to Sheena and she wondered if he was reciting from the brochure.

"Behaviourally, Percy is part barnacle and part human. The barnacle allows him to live a contented sessile existence. The trouble with that is a barnacle doesn't have the wit to open a door for you so there's a touch of human brain in there to help him carry out commands, though not a lot. He's been kept pretty dim for humanitarian reasons." Sheena shuddered.

"You mean, he suffers?"

"Of course not - but he could do if the gene mix was wrong. You can forget that stuff about killer houses on the rampage." He waved a dismissive hand. "The media, you know? No, you'd never have trouble like that with Percy. He's left the motile stage and of course, all our houses are neutered before we let them."

Sheena was wondering if she could afford second thoughts about the whole thing.

"Let's go upstairs."



The Let Officer brushed past her and strode down the hall. Sheena couldn't tell if there was a look in his eye or whether it was her dirty mind. She braced herself and followed him, Sammy trailing from her hand. The stairs wobbled slightly behind the Let Officer and they yielded unpleasantly under her feet.

"You'll get used to the stairs. You appreciate that there is only so much hard matter to go round."

He led them into the master bedroom. It was big and airy and would be ideal for her and the boys. She forgot all about that as he moved to the bed.

"No husband, then, I see from the application."

This was it, she thought, the moment they got to the nitty-gritty.

"That's right, I'm a widow." She decided she wouldn't be able to go through with anything sordid after all.

"Well, I'm afraid you're stuck with the double bed. You see, we had a problem with long term irritation from foreign bodies in our earlier houses and we found it easier to design in the furniture. In fact, a lot of these furniture items are fully functioning internal organs."

How could she have thought he was opening the way for a sexual bribe? The man was a perfectly ordinary, decent official. Her heart went out to him.

"If we were to accept you as a tenant, you would all be able to move in today, wouldn't you?" He looked anxious.

"Oh yes, no problem there." No problem was an understatement. The Army couldn't keep them away, not after two years in that verminous little hole.

"I don't mean to be offensive, but I've seen a lot of big families in this job and you don't look the type to have five children."

Sheena laughed. "No offence taken."

She knew it was a question, not a comment, and she debated not satisfying his curiosity. She decided the children needed the house too much to risk offending him.

"I've got a rare disorder. Hyperfertility." The man looked embarrassed. Sheena smiled to help him. "Too many eggs. The first time round we had the girls, triplets. Second time round, both Robert and I wanted a boy so we took a risk." Sheena laughed. "Twins - but boy twins!" The Let Officer smiled.

"Do you still want the house?" he asked, after a moment.

Sheena was stunned. Was he offering it to them?

"We'd love it if you'll take us," she said.

"Well, Mrs Resnick, we'd love to have you. You're just the sort of people the *Living Homes* project was started for. The housing shortage is bad news for everybody - but large families like yours get it the worst."

"Where do I sign?"

"I'm sure you won't regret it, Mrs Resnick. There's hardly any maintenance or cleaning. The windows are modified eye lenses washed by the crying reflex when grime reaches a set level..."

There was a lot of other stuff but Sheena wasn't listening. She floated on air. Her dream had come true. For the first time since Robert had died the kids would have a home of their very own.

When he stopped talking, Sheena said, "I don't know how to thank you. You've made a decent life possible for us."

The Let Officer looked embarrassed.

"I'd better just show you the garage." He took them to the far side of the garden where a small sugarloaf ran its tail-

bone down to the main road below. "Although he looks like Percy's little brother, the garage is, in fact, a more rudimentary organism." He turned to the garage.

"Open wide!"

Two lips rolled back, revealing a metallic green Volkswagen Shuttle inside. The Let Officer's hands balled into fists. After a moment of biting his lip, he said, "I apologise for this screw-up."

"It should have gone with the last tenants, you mean?"

"Too right."

"No problem. I'll leave my car out front." Sheena said.

The Let Officer smiled. "Not at all. Don't worry, I'll sort it out by the time you get back with the kids."

"Is it OK for me to get them now?"

"Yes, of course. In some respects, the sooner the better. You want to get them all in by ten thirty this evening, though, because Percy is trained to sleep through the night and only his emergency reflexes will be operational after then."

"Er, that's a little limiting isn't it, to have everybody in by ten thirty every night?"

"I appreciate it may be at first but that's the standard around here. If you really can't adapt to it, you can always train Percy up to your own routine."

"OK, fine." Sheena beamed at him. "I can't wait to see their faces when they get out here."

At first, the kids were awed, scared even, but after only a little while they loved the place. Sammy and Aldan spent the evening tormenting poor Percy, getting him to open and shut the front door, to roll his eyelids down over the windows and anything else they could find which hugely amused them.

Bethie, Jan and Clara were more adventurous and went out looking for the other kids in the neighbourhood.

Sheena sorted out their belongings. She'd had the heavier items of furniture delivered to the *Living Homes* Warehouse for auction. She was sorry to see some things go - especially the battered red armchair she had lugged around since her single days. She'd brought the rest of their stuff over in three car trips. By the time she'd completed the third, the Volkswagen Shuttle had gone from the garage. She dismissed it from her mind. The Let Officer had been funny about it but that was his problem.

She was exhausted but happy by the time darkness fell. Just after ten o'clock, the girls came in breathlessly to announce that the big family next door had just moved in too. They were bright-eyed and excitable. They'd made new friends. Sheena was glad for them.

At ten thirty, a mooing blew up on the far side of the estate and swept towards them, new voices adding to it as it came. When it reached them, Percy joined in too. "Bed-time. It's bedtime," he bellowed. They all laughed delightedly at his goofy voice.

Sheena tucked the children up in bed, making a game of the new kind of bedclothes. In her own bed, she had to quell a guilty revulsion for those selfsame "bedclothes". She squawked as they rose up and covered her like a huge warm tongue, but once she got used to the fleshy feel, she found it deliciously comfortable. Percy was damned weird - but he was home, and that was something they hadn't had in a long while. Thinking warm thoughts, and massaged gently by the bed, Sheena drifted off to sleep.

Something woke her in the night. She spent only a few groggy moments between waking and sleep but it seemed





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a long time. Everything was so strange, she just couldn't get her bearings. When she understood that the children were screaming, she snapped awake. Percy. The new house.

No wonder she'd been confused. Things were different. Where was the bed? She appeared to be lying on the floor. She stood up and warm liquid splashed around her ankles. She couldn't see a thing. "Lights on", she told Percy, but there was no change. "Open eyes", she shouted at the window. The eyelid remained in place. The children were screaming wildly now. Fighting panic, she made for where the door ought to be. She felt around the wall for the luminescent patch for soft lighting. She stroked it and it sent a weak light across the room.

The furniture had been retracted and foaming liquid was running down the walls. She lifted a foot out of the liquid and it looked raw and venous. In a horrible insight, she understood that the outer layer of flesh had been eroded away.

The liquid was still rising.

She screamed and battered against the door. She battered at it for a long, long time but she seemed only to stimulate production of the liquid and it ran in streams over her face and back. The kids were silent now but still she battered at the door. Before her sight failed, she saw half-digested lumps of flesh slide from her to the floor.

She was still conscious when the stomach contractions started, pushing her down into the churning digestive juices but she wasn't really herself by then. She had stopped experiencing herself fully as a person some time back, once she realised that a housing shortage can also be thought of as an excess of people.

"What beautiful flowers!"

"Yes, indeed, most prospective tenants admire them. The whole thing is a complete biosystem, you know. The house digests unwanted matter and turns it into nutrients for the garden." The Let Officer noticed that today the clearance team had not only emptied the garage but left the door yawning wide as a sign to him. He felt satisfaction. He could still kick ass when he wanted to.

"Percy" is Stephen Markley's first published story, although others are due to appear in *REM*, *Exuberance* and *Auguries*. At present he is writing full time and working on a science fiction novel as well as stories. He likes music – Jazz - Fusion, Blues and Classical – and has played Blues Harmonica in a number of bands. His wife also writes and is his most helpful critic. They have a Staffordshire Bull Terrier called "Bryn" who is obsessive about tennis balls.



# Blind the Mouse

by Mark Close

Kafari sat watching the storms on the surface of the planet. Everything was red. There were shades, subtle variations but always reds. It was as if his usual range of vision had been severely limited. But he had only to look around the viewing room to see that wasn't so. He looked around the room quite often. Red bored him.

A mouse appeared at his feet. It climbed up the side of his chair and settled itself to watch the violence taking place on the other side of the viewing port.

"What do you want?" Kafari had grown to dislike the mice. They irritated him the way they suddenly appeared without warning. The other crewmembers churned out the usual company line about the mice being usefully inconspicuous. Kafari always wanted to tell them that as far as he was concerned the company were just a bunch of idiots. However he had a pension to think of and a C.V. that was far from being the most impressive in existence. So he kept his thoughts to himself.

"I have been monitoring your consumption of alcohol based liquids. The amount of alcohol in your bloodstream is well above the recommended level. I felt that it was important to advise you of this fact." The mouse's voice was even and although it had been created by the most sophisticated vocal module it betrayed no feeling of humanity whatsoever.

Kafari's fingers tightened around the nearly empty glass. He glared down at the artificial rodent, soothing images of a non-functioning artificial rodent flashing into his mind.

Smiling, at length, he relaxed his grip on the glass and put it on the table beside him.

"It's going to take more than a sanctimonious little arti to annoy me," he murmured, practising the breathing exercises that Doc Suffluff had showed him.

"Your tolerance level is low, therefore...."

"I said, 'What do you want?'" Kafari felt tension creeping into his shoulders again.

"I came to impart the information earlier stated."

"Well, thank you very much. That was most considerate of you," he said with heavy sarcasm.

"It was a pleasure." The mouse ran from the chair arm and scuttled along the connecting corridor, hugging the bottom of the walls. Kafari watched it go with undisguised hatred.

Broser and Haplan were playing a game in the recreation room when Kafari found them. They didn't notice him at first, so engrossed were they. Kafari hovered near the entrance, unsure whether to enter. Haplan completed a move then lifted his head to the irregular patterns that moved slowly about the walls. His face was relaxed, his head moving in unison with the soothing motion of the images. He suddenly realised that Kafari was there and turned lazily towards him. Kafari nodded and Haplan smiled.

"You shouldn't go creeping about, Kafari," Broser said, looking up from the board.

"I don't."

"You do. Always have done." Broser clasped his hands behind his neck and stretched.

"It's true." Haplan's look was benign.

Kafari walked out. He could hear Broser's low chuckle. Haplan said something that he didn't catch.

"Can I help you, Mr Kafari?" said a voice near his feet. Kafari jumped back and glared at the mouse.

"Why don't you bugger off?" he screamed.

"That particular word is prohibited in normal conversation. But I understand your request, and I shall now comply with it." The mouse scuttled away. Kafari stared after it hating its smugness.

Kafari hadn't had a good night's sleep since he arrived at the base six months before. Lying on his bed he could see the storms through the viewport on the far wall of his room. Their ceaseless turmoil held huge fascination for him; the colour was boring but the movement was wild and ever changing. There was something in the unchanging nature of it all though that depressed him. It depressed him even more that he couldn't put his finger on why it did. He'd never gotten around to fixing the broken shutters so each and every night he watched the storms - could do little else - before he dozed for a couple of hours and dreamed about red worlds.

He couldn't sleep. The constant churning of the atmosphere failed to tranquillise his mind. He thought about the mice, his hatred for them stronger than ever. He thought about Broser and Haplan, hating them for humiliating him.

They'd never got on. Kafari knew he wasn't an easy man but they never even tried. He seldom saw the other members of the crew. Doc Suffluff spent all his time in a laboratory fiddling around with his experiments on space diseases. Pakklu and Jascroen, the remaining two, had been on a mining assignment at one of the sub bases on the other side of the planet for the last two months. The fact that they were overdue by three days didn't unduly worry Kafari. As far as he was concerned the less people about the base the better. Whatever happened when they did return he knew that he would naturally be excluded from it.

He closed his eyes but sleep wouldn't come. It was no use. Getting up from his bed he crossed the room to a locker set into the wall. Inside was an old fashioned stereo system. It was his pride and joy. He'd found it in an antique shop back on Earth. He thought back to the ancient street in the North Central Conurbation. The old man in the shop told him that the place had once been called Bradford. The name appealed to him. He sighed, suddenly saddened by the thought that places didn't possess their old names anymore.

Taking out his handkerchief he dusted the machine. He knew it wasn't a job that needed doing. The extraction system of the base meant that all the rooms were dust free. But Kafari did it nevertheless, glad to feel tenderness for something.

Underneath the stereo was a space where he kept his records. Selecting one he placed it onto the turntable.

The music blasted out. Kafari could feel it as well as hear



it, the force of the sound rippling through the room. He loved it. Closing his eyes, he relaxed. There was one particular passage that was his favourite. He listened for it, eager for the familiar sensation of pleasure that accompanied it.

The music stopped.

"I have discontinued the noise." It was a mouse that had appeared through the small gap near the floor. The gaps were designed to allow the mice access into all the rooms in the base.

Kafari was seething.

"What've you done?"

"As you are aware the regulations state that noise is not permitted to rise above certain levels. The noise in your room exceeded the upper limit by twelve points."

Kafari decided that something had to be done.

**T**he theory was that the mice were perfect. Nevertheless there were accidents and it was in a special workroom where they were repaired. The room also contained their control system.

As far as he knew no one had been in the control room in the time he'd been on the base. The place looked as if it hadn't been visited for years.

The mice were a design success, Kafari grudgingly acknowledged that. However like all artinoids, especially the small ones that weren't large enough to have self re-charging functions, they ran out of juice periodically. Once their power levels were low the mice simply plugged themselves into one of the numerous power points around the base and recharged.

Kafari chuckled to himself and flicked a switch, cutting off the power to the recharging points.

"Smug little bastards," he said with a satisfied laugh.

**T**he music blasted out as it had done for the past two hours. Kafari luxuriated in his bed certain that he wouldn't be disturbed. By now most of the mice would be immobilised. Only a few of the third shift ones wouldn't have reached the point where they needed recharging but they were in another part of the base. Soon it wouldn't matter where they were.

His favourite passage came up and he enjoyed it as if hearing it for the first time, responding to it with the same stomach tingling, nerve dancing euphoria that he had experienced when he was a kid.

He remembered his childhood, the music taking him back to days in the country side, the thrill of seeing Melissa Tamm's underwear when he was ten, the excitement of playing in the ruins of Richmond, having battles in the empty castle, the whole gang of them, one happy unit enjoying themselves with no autocratic artinoids telling them what to do.

The record clicked to a standstill but Kafari didn't hear it. He was fast asleep, a huge grin on his face.

**I**n the night something exploded in his dreams but he didn't wake up. He dreamed about Melissa Tamm as she tempted him with a kaleidoscope of different coloured underwear. He woke up, the red of the storms the first thing he saw, and wondered how Melissa Tamm would have grown up if she hadn't fallen off the top of the keep of Richmond castle.

Kafari got out of bed, and pulling on his clothes, went for something to eat.

The recreation room was empty which was fine by him. It meant he could eat his breakfast in private. His pleasure

at being alone was gradually marred, though, by a nagging worry. The clock said that it was late. There was still no sign of the others. Broser had an appetite like a Blue whale. Kafari couldn't remember a morning in which Broser hadn't already been stuffing his face by the time he arrived at the recreation room.

"I'll have a look round after I've finished this," he said to the mouse, inert by the door. He chewed happily, pleased that the mouse couldn't answer him.

**T**he silence didn't worry him but the slight reek of sulphur did. The smell grew as he moved towards the storage bays. It meant only one thing. The skin of the base had been punctured. Kafari stopped in his tracks at the thought. He listened but there wasn't the slightest sound. The pressure seemed to be normal. Deciding that someone must have sealed the puncture he moved on.

Beyond the storage bays were the airlocks.

"Kafari," he heard a weak voice say as he entered the suiting up room. It was a mess. Equipment lay strewn all over. In a corner beside the airlock was Haplan in a surface suit, the helmet upturned by his feet. Kafari went over to him then recoiled. Haplan's skin was red and blistered. Clumps of hair were on the floor, blisters showing on the man's scalp.

"What happened?" Kafari croaked, his mouth suddenly dry with fear. He hung back afraid to go near Haplan.

"Kafari. Where've you been?" Kafari was about to answer, but Haplan shook his head, wincing in pain as he did so.

"Pakklu and Jascroen. They came back last night. Dead. Dead for days. Automatics brought the crawler back. They're in the airlock with Doc and Broser."

Kafari got up and giving Haplan a wide berth looked through the airlock window. There were two bodies both in an advanced state of blistering. Beyond them were two surface suits. At first he thought that they were empty but looking closer he realised that there was something inside them. A thick viscous liquid oozed from the holes in the suits.

Kafari's stomach turned over.

"Doc said it was some kind of virus," said Haplan, his face becoming more corrupted as Kafari watched.

"They must've picked it up at the sub base."

"But why didn't we know...." Kafari stopped in mid sentence knowing exactly why.

"Systems failure. The mice had all been immobilised. We had no warning." Haplan pitched forward suddenly, the blister on the back of his neck splitting open, drenching the back of his surface suit with pus.

Kafari didn't need to check to know Haplan was dead.

**K**afari had panicked. Going straight to Doc Suffluss's laboratory he had pumped enough antibodies into himself to keep a herd of elephants alive for centuries. But it was all a waste of effort. The blisters were already appearing on the backs of his hands. His muscles ached and his bones were painful.

He lay on his bed and watched the storms raging on the surface. A smile cracked his blistered face but somehow his mind had become unhitched from the disintegration of his body.

The music blared out and he was transported back to his childhood once more.

"What's that music?" said Melissa Tamm as they sat on top of the keep, the wind cool and bracing up so high.

"Just something," he heard himself say.

"Oh." She seemed satisfied with what he had said and continued to look at the valley way below, her face serene.



They sat in silence, not needing to say a word. The russet storms mingled with the ruins strewn landscape and Kafari saw how well they complemented each other, both possessing the kind of calmness he had always yearned for.

When he looked over at Melissa she wasn't there anymore. The tears smarted on the blistered skin on his cheeks as he remembered, cursing his stupidity.

**Mark Close is 29 years old and single;  
"Blind the Mouse" is his first published work.**

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# ADAM'S OFFSPRING

By Duncan Long

*In the future, the structure of the human body will change.*

*Human beings will exist in many forms. A person may be formed of recombinant genes—*

*Or even molded from stainless steel and plastics.*

*It's probably a trap,* Drogmir thought, his two yellow cat eyes glowing in the dim illumination. He stepped away from the controls of the stargate and entered the shimmering surface of its archway. There was a momentary flash of nausea, and resistance, as if he were frozen in a congealing wall of black amber, and then he broke through the energy field, striding across light years, his iridescent skin shimmering in the dim light. Within a minute he had traveled halfway across his galaxy, within the warped space inside the stargate.

Drogmir was a fixer, one of the rare human beings that was often called upon to help the artificial intelligence overlords ruling the 23rd Century. His job entailed unraveling puzzles the robotic problem solvers found too minor, or too messy, to handle. But today's task was different from the others he'd been called upon to solve.

"All our reasoning says it should be impossible," Nishdare 2654, Drogmir's overlord, had told him during the hastily called audience in the being's sanctuary only an hour before. "Your acquaintance seems to have invented a readily transportable disassembler that doesn't produce excess energy when breaking molecules. He has twice used the device to completely destroy the guard bots sent to take him. Now he has told us we have one last chance to obtain his secret—if we pay his price and send a courier to Yelreb III."

Drogmir said nothing, mulling over the ramifications of such a weapon if it really existed.

"This device suggests a whole new line of physics," the overlord continued, his voice echoing in the dimly lit hall, which was totally devoid of furniture. His holographic image shimmered as he seemed to uncomfortably shift its position where it hung, seeming to sit in mid-air. "It would mark the first real human innovation since AI systems were initiated nearly two centuries ago."

The fixer said nothing, trying to control his emotions so his anger wouldn't register on the monitors that lined the sanctuary. While he knew Nishdare was only stating the facts and meant no slight, the thought that humanity had invented nothing of value in two centuries stung Drogmir deeply. Finally he spoke, his voice emotionless. "But Gar is an immortal. How could he use such a weapon without his circuitry being affected?"

"Another mystery that our physics says is impossible — unless it is remote controlled. Such a narrow band of energy, so focused... And his background suggests no talent in the area of physics — we have examined his records. Of course intelligence is cheap to purchase these days, there's almost no limit to the expansion that he might have snapped into his skull. But even so—it appears to be a total break-

through in technology.

"One faction of our projection banks thinks he must have stumbled onto some alien technology," the AI added.

Drogmir knew speculation was something the machines were good at and could do endlessly; so he decided to cut off his master before he reeled off any more theories.

"And my job is to meet Gar on Yelreb III and take the device?"

"Correct," the machine answered, its unblinking eyes regarding its servant. "You may destroy Gar if you wish and keep the gem, in addition to your wage. Or you may pay off his ransom demand in exchange for his secret. All we need is his secret or the device; the cost is paltry for such technology and we would be glad to obtain it either way. No doubt you would find the latter more agreeable than destroying an old friend."

*No doubt,* Drogmir thought. He knew that AIs never joked; they regarded humor as a human weakness. *How out of touch with humanity the AI overlords are,* he reflected.

Of course Gar wasn't really the friend the fixer once knew; the real Gar had committed suicide. His personality continued on as an "immortal"—an android with an AI brain copied from the deceased human being's memories, rapidly removed from his dying brain. The immortal was a good copy, impossible to distinguish from the original. His skin felt warm and all his reactions and words were Gar's; but Drogmir had never been able to forget the body of the original Gar, unceremoniously dumped into a disposal chute.

*So perhaps the AI isn't so wrong after all,* the fixer had thought, turning and leaving the sanctuary, since it was obvious the meeting was over. Perhaps he would kill his old friend. Perhaps it would be easy to exterminate the bogus Gar, knowing that he was only a machine that pretended to be a man.

Or was there still too much of the ghost of the man in the machine that impersonated him?

"That's a good question," Drogmir muttered, nearing the end of the stargate's passage. He shoved through the syrupy force field and strode from the portal, shifting his vision into the infrared region for better coverage as he carefully studied his surroundings for any sign of danger.

His scan revealed no warm-blooded creature nearby except for a small ratlike animal that scampered away at the man's approach. No other living thing in sight.

Yelreb III, as always, was nearly deserted without even a sightseer about. Only an experimental station occupied by hobbyists lay some ninety kilometers to the south, near the rim of the shadows. He was alone with the ruins of the once-great civilization resting silently around him, painted in shades of gray and black.

He glanced upward toward the giant black planet that eternally eclipsed the nearby star, shrouding Yelreb III with only the faint corona and light from a nearby gas nebula, keeping the outer planet from being plunged into total darkness. Drogmir had visited Yelreb III's lone city before and had never had any desire to come back. His AI masters had ordered him to wipe out a coven of pukers engaged in more than the usual joy crimes, serious enough to spur the over-



lords to order the fixer's actions. Now he had returned to meet with to steal or buy the immortal's secret, killing him if necessary.

He strode out of the pool of electric light surrounding the stargate, the thick muscles of his genetically altered two-meter frame rippling as he crept along the terraced courtyard. The paved thoroughfare stretched into the distance like a narrow canyon in a mountain range of buildings, his footsteps echoing off the rough granite walls. A moaning wind sweeping through the spiralling towers high above him.

As another of the tiny rodents scurried into the deeper shadows, Drognir realized he couldn't recall having seen any such animal during his previous visit. *Probably sneaked through the stargate*, he decided. Dandelions and rats seemed to inhabit the known universe, thanks to their abilities to smuggle themselves through the gates.

There was no sign of Gar. Had the rendezvous been a trick? It was very likely; the mechanicals had tried to ambush the immortal twice before and, both times, all twenty of the guards had disappeared without a trace. The burst messages Gar had sent to the overlords boasted of the effects of his new invention. The bots had completely disappeared, but it seemed to Drognir that something didn't ring true.

The fixer neared the Tower of Nothingness, a windowless building that stretched upward out of sight, the jewel of the Yelreb III civilization. Like mankind, the alien culture that had built the structure had been totally disrupted by their contact with the AI overlords following the arrival of the first human explorers reaching the planet's surface. Within a decade, the worm-like Yelrebs were dispersed across the galaxy, absorbed into the fabric of the Federation, seduced by the AI's promise of a long, carefree existence. And now Yelreb III was unoccupied.

Drognir shifted his vision into the infrared and checked for the heat signature of living beings. He perceived nothing but more of the rodent-like animals retreating into the shadows. Knowing he might have a long wait ahead of him, he lowered his metabolism to conserve energy. The overlords would expect him to linger if Gar didn't show immediately and the fixer hadn't eaten or slept for several days. He hunkered down in the shadows and waited.

The planet's radio bands were empty except for the telemetry from the research station. The fixer reviewed the mem-chip library in his head, but nothing really interested him.

Boredom reigned; time ticked away: ten minutes, half an hour, finally an hour, universal time.

Then there was a fluttering to his left.

Drognir tensed, reflexively switching on his electronics so his enhanced vision, targeting, and ID template systems were online. He whirled around, his pistol snaking into his hand from its hidden wrist holster.

There was nothing in the infrared spectrum. A mechanical? Or perhaps Gar had found a way to mask his body heat.

*There!*

His vision zeroed in on a plasfax sheet tumbling end over end down the courtyard and into the blackness behind a low wall. The pistol retracted from his hand into its holster as he sighed grimly to himself. *I just witnessed a major event on this lifeless planet*, he told himself.

He tried to relax, realizing his environment was oppressive and definitely had him spooked. Toggling on his clock, it displayed the time in his right eye. *Five minutes and I'm leaving*, he promised himself as he leaned back against the rough gray wall of the building, leaving all his systems acti-

vated.

Gar should have been there an hour ago. Something must have gone wrong. Or perhaps it had simply been a test to see if the overlords were going to try to trap the immortal. And how many such tests would be needed before Drognir would actually meet with Gar?

*Hell, if I were Gar I'd be on the other side of the galaxy trying to buy new ID*, the fixer thought. The AIs wouldn't quit until they had the secret if it led to some new technology.

And how had Gar created such a device? His hobbies had included magic and biochemistry—not physics. None of it made sense.

An animal howled in the distance and the rodents scurried into the shadows. A yellowed paper, abandoned by a thoughtless tourist tumbled across the courtyard. The five minutes were up.

Drognir quick-scanned the area once more, his footsteps echoing from the courtyard walls as he crept back toward the brightly-lit gate. He activated the charge ID in the end of his finger as he approached the archway. He touched his finger to the control slot.

And nothing happened.

Drognir attempted activating it again, but the unit in his finger refused to energize the gate. Acutely aware that he stood in the open, exposed by the bright lamp above the gate, he tried a third time and then ran a quick check to be sure the ID circuits in his finger were working.

The ID circuits weren't malfunctioning. Deactivating his finger chip, he thumbed the emergency button on the stargate itself. The unit blinked once and went out. Slowly he surveyed the area around him once again for any sign of life.

Nothing but more of the scurrying, rodent-like animals. Glancing back at the stargate, he suppressed the urge to kick the controls, knowing that damaging them would just add to the delay.

He'd have a long enough wait. Even if a repair crew had been sent when he'd activated the emergency button, they would have to fly over land from the nearest stargate — probably at the experimental station. He checked his info bits — yes, he was right. Ninety-four point three kilometers. It would be a wait of at least a half hour at best.

A noise. He amplified his hearing and filtered out the extraneous noise, capturing the thin whine of a flitter. Coming closer, judging by the doppler. Realizing he was standing out in the open, Drognir raced across the courtyard, returning to his previous location, hiding once more in the shadows.

Soon, the silver, dish-shaped craft hummed into sight. Four metres across, it had a flat passenger deck surrounded by a guard rail, its top open to the elements. Its curved side was emblazoned with the repair logo and two figures sat in the seat of the old flitter; the aircraft circled once and then settled with a rough landing, close to the stargate.

Were they really repairmen? Drognir thought they surely must be; it seemed unlikely that Gar go to such an elaborate scheme to trick him when Drognir might easily have been ambushed as he came through the gate.

*Or ambushed me almost anytime afterward as far as that goes*, the fixer thought, cautiously walking out of the shadows across the courtyard. For a fleeting moment, he wondered if that were Gar's secret: a carefully laid ambush rather than any type of break-through technology. *Now there's a thought*. That would be just like Gar; he always liked hoaxes.

His attention returned to the two figures who jumped from the flitter without bothering to lower its ladder. They



stood in the brightly-lit area surrounding the stargate, apparently unaware of the fixer. The man had to be a hobbyist since robotics had brought an end to human work, now outlawed except for humans engaged in non-dangerous not-for-profit work—like repairing stargates.

The hobbyist was a stocky man with dirty gray hair and a soiled uniform. The mechanical was a chromed, badly dented bot in the old humanoid configuration. Oddly enough, it wore an equally dirty jumpsuit.

"Bloody 'ell," the man swore in a gruff voice as he removed the plate from the stargate's controls. "Retinoid's burned out. An' damn if we just used are last replacement last week."

"Retinoid?" the mechanical said as it cocked its head to one side and gazed over the man's shoulder. "I believe you're right."

"Course I'm right," the gruff-voiced man said, throwing a tool back into the red tool box lying beside the gate. "Give me some room, will ya?"

The bot noticed Drognir and swivelled its head around to glare at him. *<What are you doing here?>* it asked over datalink, its body rotating fluidly under its head so the whole mechanism faced the approaching fixer.

*<I'm here on official overlord business>* Drognir explained through the transponder in his throat, communicating with the machine via an invisible, modulated laser beam. With the rash of joy crimes and Neo-Luddites attacks, the fixer knew the bot would be cautious at the approach of a stranger. He rapidly exchanged codes with the machine, letting it know he worked for the AI overlords and establishing that it did as well. "So what brought you two here?" Drognir finally asked aloud, drawing the human checking out the stargate into the conversation after being satisfied the two figures in front of him posed no danger.

"Ot?" the gruff-voiced man said, unaware of the silent exchange that had taken place between his robotic companion and the fixer. He glanced up and noticed Drognir for the first time.

The fixer steeled himself for the scorn most humans heaped upon him. As a recombinant "vatter" rather than a "true blood" and a servant of the overlords as well, he was hated on sight by most of the humans he met.

"ello, there," the man said without any trace of animosity. "Hearin's goin'. Didn't 'ear ya come up." He faced the mechanical. "You weren't interrogatin' this man over datalink behind my back, was ya?" he admonished the bot.

The machine didn't answer but cocked its head to one side.

The man turned back to Drognir. "As to yer question, we jist 'appened ta be in 'e area and caught the emergency signal before it dropped off the air."

"How soon can you have the gate repaired?" Drognir asked, surprised at the man's friendly attitude.

"You're lucky we were comin' back from Jursa when you "it emergency button," the man replied. "O'erwise you'd 'ave been 'ere for a bit."

"Can you get the gate back up?" Drognir persisted.

The mechanical spoke, "We don't have a spare -"

"I'll do 'uh talkin'," the hobbyist interrupted. "We don't 'ave uh spare retinoid. But you can 'itch uh ride with us. We'll 'ave you back to the post's gate in no time." He scrutinized the courtyard as he spoke.

Drognir saw the flicker of movement that had attracted the hobbyist's attention. A pack of the rodent-like creatures loped across the courtyard and dived into the shadows along the wall near the stargate.

"Bloody 'ell," the man shouted, his eyes darting wildly toward the pack of animals. "'Ey're 'oogies 'round 'ere."

Oogies? Drognir thought as he watched another pack of the animals come scurrying toward them. A rapid search of

his data chips revealed no definition for the word.

"What are oogies?" the bot asked, equally baffled.

"Oogies! 'Oogies!" the man screamed. "Come on, git into uh flitter." He drew a worn needle pistol out of the belt on his jumpsuit and fired a wild shot into the shadows where the creatures had vanished.

The mechanical swivelled in a blur of speed and bounded across the space toward the flitter and scampered up the slippery side of the craft. Not sure of the danger, the fixer rushed toward the flitter, the hobbyist coming behind him, firing his pistol into the shadows.

The bot supplely draped itself back over the railing to give Drognir a hand. The man hesitated a moment.

"Get up here," the bot ordered him.

The fixer grabbed the steel and plastic appendage. The machine's grip was strong yet gentle, rapidly lifting him upward.

One of the creatures sprang up onto the flitter's guard rail as Drognir scrambled over; the mechanical released the man's hand and swiveled gracefully, crushing the beast with its fist and yelling, "Hurry up, Teelee."

The man jumped upward with muscles that Drognir realized must have been strengthened by a life on a plus-G planet. Teelee slung his arms over the edge of the flitter and scrambled up almost effortlessly, just ahead of the pack of animals now swarming after him.

"Bloody 'ell," the man swore, dropping to his knees on the deck behind the driver's seat. "I t'ink one of 'em 'oogies got under my skin."

And then Drognir knew what the animals were, even without consulting his memory chips.

*Hoogies.*

He hadn't understood what the man had been saying because of his thick accent. Drognir had never seen any of the creatures, but he'd heard stories and knew how dangerous they were.

Out of the corner of his eye, the fixer saw the shadow of one of the animals as it dropped over the edge of the flitter to the floor beside him. Tearing his vibraknife from its sheath, Drognir flicked on the ceramic blade of his weapon, its edge vanishing in a blur of motion as he faced the creature.

The hairless green hoogie was small, about the size of a man's hand and was covered with slime-matted fur. Its six tiny eyes gleamed in the dim light and it stood on large, grasshopper-like legs, poised to leap.

Without warning, it sprang into the air, flying at the fixer.

The vibrating blade slashed in front of Drognir, blocking the animal's jump and impaling the squealing creature on the knife, its green blood spurting into the air. With disgust, Drognir flicked the animal over the railing and it tumbled to the pavement below.

"Help us," the mechanical screamed behind Drognir. Drognir turned to see the bot ripping its partner's jumpsuit apart. "One of the creatures is in Teelee!"

"E's in my gut!" the Teelee cried. "I can feel 'im clawing in my gut! Never mind me, git the flitter started or we'll never get out of here."

Drognir studied the controls. "What's the activation key code?" he yelled, beaming the message via datalink at the same time. *Hell, I don't even see a keypad on this old crate.*

"Damn," Teelee screamed, writhing as the lump under the skin over his belly lurched upward. "The flitter 'as a mechanical key. It's in my pocket."

"Get back," Drognir shouted to the mechanical, crowding by the bot and kneeling on the floor of the flitter by Teelee. "You take care of the hoogies," he ordered the bot as he searched in the man's two pockets.





No key.

Frantically, he scrutinized the jumpsuit for other pockets. There were none.

The lump on Teelee's belly lurched upward again and then vanished under the man's rib cage. The hobbyist yelped in pain and coughed up a ribbon of frothy blood.

Search for the key later, Drognir told himself. There was no time to waste if the man was going to survive. "Watch what you're doing," the fixer ordered the mechanical who twirled at superhuman speed to hammer a hoogie into meat, barely missing Drognir's scalp in the process.

The fixer turned back toward the human and ripped Teelee's suit apart to expose his whole akdomen. On the white flesh was a bloody hole where the creature had chewed through the man's skin near his navel. A large bump again appeared on the man's belly.

*That's good,* Drognir thought. *It's headed away from his heart and lungs.* If it had continued to claw upward and toward ... Now the lump showed exactly where the hoogie was, the skin convoluting as the animal shifted to tunnel deeper.

"Oh, nedek!" Teelee screamed as he gripped Drognir's arm in pain, then settled back, sinking into shock.

*Have to keep him conscious,* Drognir thought. He'd be less apt to go into shock if he didn't pass out. "Stay awake," he yelled at Teelee.

"Okay," the hobbyist whispered through ashen lips, his eyes fluttering open.

The bot hammered two more of the animals in rapid succession, sending a spray of green slime splatter onto the back of Drognir's hands and neck. Ignoring the mess, the fixer thumbed his vibraknife to its lowest setting.

*No time to sterilize it,* he decided as he centered its point over the bump which was again moving toward the man's rib cage. Antibiotics would do the job later. Switching to a

higher lens setting in his eyes, the fixer ignored the sweat streaming down his forehead and sliced into Teelee's leathery skin, cutting a long, precise incision over the location of the animal.

The creature inside Teelee peeked out of the fleshy hole and hissed at the fixer who struck at the same instant with the blade, severing the animal's head. He then quickly extracted the rest of the twitching body from Teelee's belly and cast the bloody animal carcass over the side of the flitter.

Drognir switched off the vibraknife and unconsciously wiped the blood and viscera off the blade onto the edge of one of the flitter's seats while he fought not to vomit. He resheathed his knife. He'd gotten the hoogie, but he could see it had done terrible damage to its victim and there was little doubt that Teelee was bleeding severely internally.

"How is he?" the bot asked, popping out a screwdriver-like appendage on its left hand. It lanced the blade of the tool through a group of the animals that were clawing their way over the edge of the flitter in front of him, then shook them off.

"He'll be fine," Drognir said, tearing large strips of material from Teelee's jump suit for an improvised bandage. The animal had chewed and burrowed a large track inside Teelee, but— provided he didn't go into shock and they got help soon — he should survive.

*If we can escape these damned animals,* Drognir added, rising and squashing a red-eyed hoogie under his heel as it scurried across the floor of the flitter.

"Here comes another pack of them!" the mechanical shouted as it speared one of the animals on the screwdriver in its left hand. With its other hand it shattered a hoogie that scrambled onto the fuselage beside it.

Drognir dragged Teelee across the slick deck and leaned him against the back of the pilot's seat. "How're you doing?" he asked the man as he knelt and searched his pockets again, trying to locate the key.

"Been better," the old man said with a forced grin.

"Kajyar!" the mechanical swore. "There must be thousands of them below us now."

Drognir stood and viewed the stream of animals scuttling in the courtyard below the flitter. "Teelee," the fixer called to the wounded man on the deck.

The gray-haired man's eyes fluttered.

"Teelee, the key isn't in either of your pockets. Think. Where else could it be?"

"Not in me pockets?" his eyes glazed over and then focused. "The tool chest," he muttered. "In the tool chest."

*And where is that?* Drognir thought as he glanced around the bare flitter. Nowhere in the craft. He slapped at three of the hoogies that peeked over the edge of the flitter. The creatures plummeted off the craft.

The fixer leaned over the guard rail to inspect the ground below.

The ground teemed with a carpet of the hoogies, jumping and milling, trying to discover a way to climb up the slick surface of the flitter struts. Only a few managed to scramble up. But slowly the mass of churning creatures were forming a slimy chain, piling atop one another, gradually nearing the open deck of the flitter.

*If I had been stranded on the ground...* Drognir didn't finish the thought; Gar had nearly trapped him. But there wasn't any time to waste thinking about what might have happened. Drognir looked beyond the hoogies. A few metres away, near the stargate, sat the red tool box. The box with the key in it.

He turned back toward the mechanical. "We've got to get the tool chest."

The mechanical slashed with its blade to chop another squealing animal, knocking pieces of it back into the court-



yard. "They can't bother me." Before Drogmir could say anything, the bot climbed over the handrail of the flitter. "They're only after flesh and blood, right?"

"Normally," Teelee said in a low voice. "But these things're in a frenzy. Don't let 'em chew into your control cables. 'Ey have chromium teeth."

"I was feeling quite sure of myself until you said that," the mechanical cracked, its green eyes flashing. What seemed to be a metallic laugh echoed from its throat, startling Drogmir with the human-like noise.

"Wait a second," Drogmir said, his Ruger 4000 pistol slipping into his hand with the activation of the targeting system in his skull. "Let me see if I can clear a path for you. There aren't enough projectiles to kill many of them, but we might cut a path."

"There's no time to waste," the bot said.

"Don't slip in the slime," the fixer warned the bot as it climbed onto the railing, balancing perfectly on the thin metal pipe. The mechanical jumped into the writhing mass of animals below him, raising a wail of squeals as he flattened the hoogies on which he landed.

Drogmir fired his pistol, clearing a bloody path ahead of the mechanical who waded through the animals that nipped at his legs as he plowed toward the tool box. He shook his legs as he plodded ahead, throwing the angry, crying animals to and fro in his wake.

Another mass of the animals swarmed from the shadows of the nearest building. Drogmir swore under his breath and discharged his weapon into the hoogies that raced toward the bot. Seeing his shots had no apparent effect, he swiveled back toward the bot and loosed another salvo, getting as close to the mechanical as he dared even with the precise aiming system that coupled his gun to his brain and eyes.

The machine below him continued its struggle toward the tool box and then, without warning, slipped in the slime, falling with a jarring crash. A wave of the creatures swept over the bot and it vanished beneath them. The mass of flesh swelled, and the bot rose to its feet, shivering the animals off its body the way a dog shakes off water.

Drogmir spotted two points of infrared light along the railing near Teelee out of the corner of his eye. Spinning on his heel, the fixer discharged a volley at the five hoogies that squeezed through the rungs of the railing. The needles struck, turning the creatures into a green mist.

*Damn things seem to understand how to keep out of sight,* he thought. *Better keep better watch. And the man has lost consciousness.* The fixer bent down. "Teelee! Wake up."

"At?" the man asked, with a wild expression on his face. "Oh. Okay." The hobbyist picked up the old pistol that still lay next to him and fired, hitting a hoogie peeking over the edge of the deck.

Drogmir checked the bot's progress. The mechanical knelt in a sea of hoogies, nearly covered by them, as he groped for the tool box. Locating it, the mechanical straightened, rising above the slimy, hissing animals.

"I'm out of ammo," Teelee gasped behind Drogmir.

"He's headed back," Drogmir said, his eyes riveted on the mechanical. "Keep a lookout and holler if you see any more of these things behind me."

"Okay."

The bot forced its way back through the mass, dragging its left leg.

*The hoogies have managed to cut through one of its control cables,* Drogmir thought as he fired another volley just ahead of the mechanical. *One more cut like that and the mechanical will be down.* Drogmir continued to snipe at the animals below him, trying to clear a path in front of the bot until it was directly under him.

"Here!" Drogmir yelled, reflexively retracting his pistol into its wrist holster and leaning down over the side of the guard rail. He offered his hand to the mechanical, realizing the bot would be unable to climb up the side of then craft with its damaged leg while holding the tool box.

Flesh and metal fingertips briefly touched, but neither could gain a handhold.

Drogmir leaned farther forward, balanced precariously on the rail, nearly falling into the seething mass below him. Locking his leg under the seat of the flitter and praying that the bench would hold their combined weights, he yelled "Try again!", ordering the mechanical which twirled below him, trying to kick and brush away the whirlpool of hoogies that threatened to sever other of his control cords.

The bot lifted his hand and grasped Drogmir's.

The fixer strained against the guard rail of the flitter, marshalling his strength to lift the heavy mechanical. The seat groaned and creaked, a pinging marking the loss of one of the screws holding it to the deck. The muscle in his leg answered with a snap.

The bot rose inches into the air until its good foot grazed a ring on the side of the craft. Then it gained a toe hold and kicked off. Suddenly the machine was clear of the railing, tumbling onto the deck beside Drogmir.

"We can't go on meeting like this," the mechanical whispered as he tore two wiggling hoogies from Drogmir's shoulder. He squeezed them into pulps and threw them over the side.

"Behind you!" Teelee warned.

Drogmir rolled over, drew his pistol, and fired a rapid volley of shots which killed three of the hoogies peeking through the rungs of the flitter's railing. He shot another hoogie near the pilot's chair.

The bot pawed through the chest it had carried aboard; tools clattered onto the deck. "Here it is!" he shouted, at the same time squashing a hoogie with the edge of his free metal hand. "I can start it," the bot said, throwing a wrench as he stood. The heavy tool clattered across the metal deck and neatly pinned a hoogie against a rung of the guard rail.

The bot limped over to the pilot's chair, slid behind the craft's control console, and inserted the key into the lock of the controls.

Drogmir turned from the bot, firing a last shot before his pistol beeped a warning that the firearm was empty. He retracted the weapon into its holster and tore out his vibraknife with one quick motion. Dropping to one knee, he speared the hoogie lunging toward him.

The flitter engine hummed a moment and then became silent leaving only the sounds of thousands of scraping claws and the whimpering squeals of the animals climbing up the side of the ship. Then a clanging filled the air as Teelee beat at the hoogies with a wrench from the tool box.

"I need some help!" the mechanical called.

Rising, Drogmir saw that the bot was trying to swipe a mass of snarling hoogies away from the controls of the flitter while smashing others under his good foot.

"Hang on," Drogmir said, running forward to stand beside the pilot's seat. He slashed with his vibraknife to the right and then the left, carving the animals running over the controls into shivering masses of flesh.

"By Sheeti's fourteen genitals!" the mechanical swore in disgust as he shoved away the green slime and crushed, oozing bodies plastering the flitter's controls. "Can't see the instrument panel." He rubbed the sleeve of his tattered jumpsuit over the display, clearing it of viscera.

The bot initiated the start sequence and the flitter



hummed, shuddered a moment threatening to stop, and then lurched from the ground. Drognir lost his balance for a second, then regained his footing and swept five of the hoogies off the guard rail with his knife and pulverized another under the heel of his boot.

He felt a tickling at his stomach but thought nothing of it, skewering another of the little demons.

"Ere's one on you!" Teelee screamed.

Drognir felt a burning pain and gaped down at the rear half of a wiggling hoogie sticking out of his belly. With horror, he realized the creature had snapped its way into his skin so rapidly that only its long hind legs and tail remained in view, encircled by a ring of blood that soaked into his jumpsuit.

The fixer grabbed the animal, barely able to hold onto its blood-soaked hind legs as it tried to burrow under his skin. He dropped the vibraknife which clattered to the deck, and grasped the animal's legs with both hands, jerking at it and feeling the animal tug at his intestines in return. Nearly losing his grasp on the slippery creature for a moment, Drognir continued to clutch it, grimacing in pain. One of the animal's clawed feet snapped off in his left hand but the fixer continued to grasp its other leg and dug his left-hand fingers under his skin to get a hold on the animal.

In the sticky blood and green ooze he felt the creature's spinal column. The man pinched hard with his fingers. The animal's small bones snapped and it loosened its hold.

The fixer extracted the creature from his belly with a cry of pain. Straightening up, he clutched the limp animal in his hand and squeezed its snapping head with his free hand, ringing its snout off. He fought not to throw up as he tossed the disgusting carcass over the side of the speeding flitter.

Wiping the blood and slime from his hands onto the front of his clothing, Drognir leaned against the handrail and checked around the deck for others of the creatures. Seeing none, he ripped off the sleeve of his jumpsuit, not daring to glance at the wound in his belly for a moment. He folded the sleeve into a large pressure bandage and pressed it over the red loop of his small intestine which hung through the skin where the animal had ripped into his flesh. Struggling to keep from fainting from the pain, he shoved on the bandage, forcing the loop of organ back under his skin.

The fixer scanned the deck once more. There didn't appear to be any more. He sat down on the floor beside Teelee, who seemed to have regained some of his colour.

"We'll be there in about an hour and a half," the bot said from the pilot's seat. "I've called ahead; a medical bot will be meeting us half way." The mechanical set the controls for automatic flight and then carefully stepped back to tower over the two humans. "I'll keep watch for any hoogies that might have managed to hang on."

Drognir closed his eyes for a moment. He glanced back toward Teelee who had passed out again. But his colour was back; he wasn't in shock. "Thanks," the fixer said, relaxing.

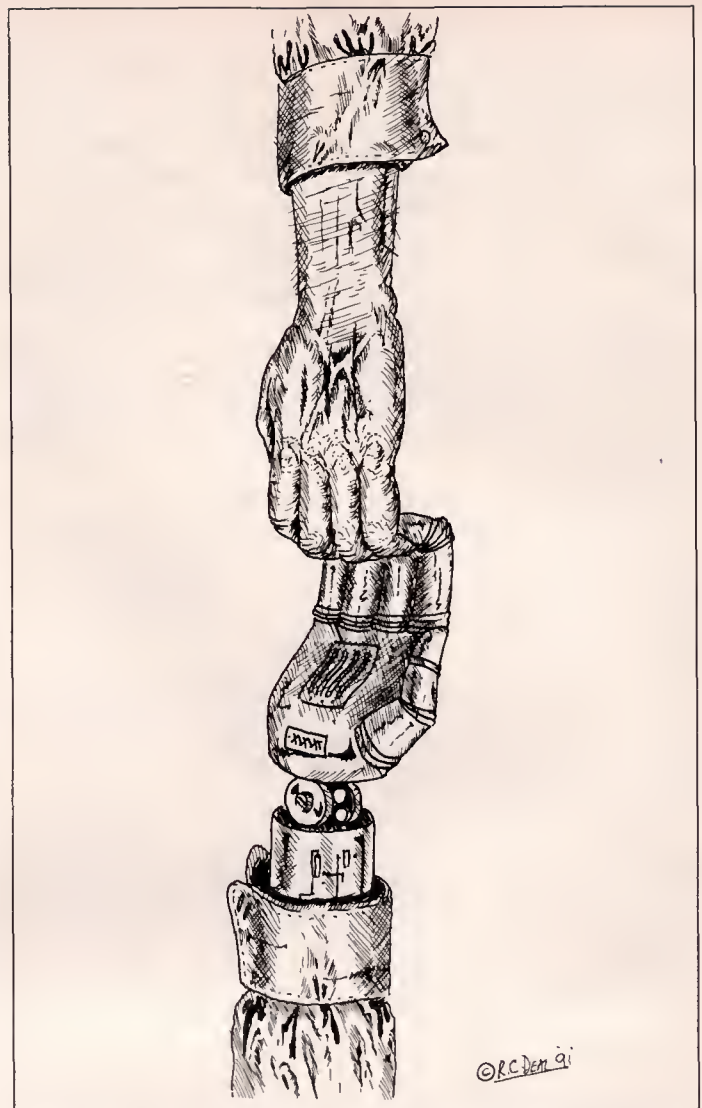
"Thank you," the mechanical replied in a low voice.

"What?" Drognir asked, confused at the bot's response. Normally mechanicals didn't thank human beings. The fixer couldn't remember when he'd ever heard one do such a thing. He looked questioningly at the machine, for a moment wondering if it was malfunctioning.

"Teelee and I are very..." the mechanical started, revolving his head in a full circle until it again faced Drognir. "We are very close. He's the only friend I have."

Drognir grunted and closed his eyes again. *A bot with a human friend? Or perhaps even a lover?* Machines were becoming almost—what? *Human*, the man decided, as he lay back and shivered in the cold.

*And no doubt my AI overlords look at the chips and electronics embedded in me and think I'm almost a mechanical,* he told himself, smirking at the irony of the thought. His mind



wondered a moment and then he realized he knew what Gar's secret was. *And won't the AIs be surprised when they find out?*

"I'm sorry," Gar whimpered, suspended above the ground by his shirt collar.

"You nearly killed me," Drognir replied, lowering the man to the ground.

"I thought they'd send another band of mechanical goons," the immortal said, his voice returning to normal as he smoothed his pink and purple plaid shirt. Like the original Gar, the android enjoyed bright colour combinations. That had made him easier to locate in the crowd. "And my hoogies wouldn't have attacked you if you hadn't gotten close to that mechanical. They have trouble telling the difference between flesh and metal once they get into their frenzy—that's why I always scheduled meets in nearly uninhabited areas."

Drognir said nothing.

"I never would have unleashed my modified hoogies if I'd known you—of all people—were in the area," Gar added. "Don't you see—it was the ultimate hoax."

"You have to admit," Gar continued, "I had the AIs fooled. I bet they nearly melted down trying to figure out how my new disrupter worked." The immortal grew suddenly quiet, his smile vanishing. "So are you going to kill me or what?"

"The overlords said I could," Drognir replied, inching closer to Gar's frightened face. Suddenly the fixer extended his hand toward the immortal.

"Here."

"What?" Gar asked, taking the packet and then realizing what it was. "The Infirneo gem?"

"None other — the price you requested in exchange for your secret."



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"My orders were to obtain your secret," Drognir replied. "Killing you is an option I'm not going to exercise — against my better judgement."

"Be seeing you then," Gar replied, clutching the packet in his hand and backing away as if fearful the fixer might change his mind.

Drognir watched the short man leave. *For a while I felt as if I were talking to Gar*, he mused. Certainly the android behaved just the way the original would have, given the same circumstances. Where did the man leave off and the machine begin?

*One thing is sure*, Drognir thought, turning back toward the nearest stargate. *The immortal is home free*. The emotionless overlords never felt any need for revenge; they'd simply absorb the information, incorporating it into their vast canon of knowledge, preventing the same mistake from being repeated in the future. A priceless gem was a worthless bauble as far as they were concerned.

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Some maintained the AI overlords were the next step up in the evolutionary line; mechanicals, though originally conceived by man, were superior to their creators and were the new inheritors of Adam and Eve's legacy.

As Drognir turned to leave, recalling the ransom he'd just paid for Gar's worthless information, a grin flickered across his features.

Duncan Long is the author of the *Night Stalkers* action/adventure series as well as the science fiction novel, "Anti-Grav Unlimited." Additionally he is internationally recognised as a weapons expert, with more than 20 non-fiction books in print covering everything from assault rifles and ballistic armour to chemical and biological warfare. His articles have appeared in the *Journal of Civil Defence*, *Gun Digest*, *The American Survival Guide* and other American publications.

Long was born and lives in eastern Kansas with his wife and two children. He has a masters degree in music composition and used to teach (which he likens to combat duty); he's also worked as a rock musician, proprietor of a mail-order business, youth director, and mail carrier among other things.

Currently he spends most of his working time writing and researching book projects. The author's hobbies include target shooting, gunsmithing and watching movies.



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# CONSPIRACY OF SOULS

By Nicola Ashton

It was past midnight and the old cottage looked deserted except for the knight pacing up and down the single downstairs room. He had been waiting almost an hour and then, without warning, he was no longer alone. A figure appeared in the far corner of the room, seemingly from nowhere. The man was plainly dressed in black. A long cloak hung from his shoulders, while a deep cowl covered his head and hid his face from view. He sat down on a nearby chair and leaned his elbows casually on the table. With the man's arrival, a foul stench permeated the chamber, uncomfortably reminding the knight of death and decay.

"Why have you summoned me, Astaroth? I still have two days before the deadline."

"My dear de Warenne, a reminder, no more."

Astaroth's voice was soft and it amused him to see the knight sweating profusely - clearly afraid. He reached into the folds of his cloak and withdrew a rolled parchment. Unfolding the document, he made a pretence of examining the writing and in particular, the signature at the bottom. The curly scrawl was red in colour, looking for all the world as though it had been signed in blood.

"The contract is perfectly clear. It has been amended once, which is highly irregular and if the Lady Aleys is not delivered to me on Midsummer's Day, as agreed, the forfeit must be paid. Your time is fast running out."

Though Astaroth's tone was still mild, the underlying threat was clear.

"And now my brother threatens to ruin everything. Damn his eyes! How did he find out?" and de Warenne slammed his mailed fists on the oak table.

"Your brother is not without supernatural abilities himself, and nothing would please him more than to thwart us both."

"But Castle Brak will fall!" the knight insisted angrily, "You yourself foretold it."

"So I did." Astaroth agreed mildly. "If you wish to increase the stake, I will even tell you how."

"What else do I have to offer?" the other demanded bitterly. "You already have my soul!"

"True, and in exchange, you have the wealth and power you desired so greatly," Astaroth retorted. "Very well. It is within my power to see the future, though its secrets are not as clear to me as those of the past. The castle's single weakness is a secret tunnel by which an enemy might enter."

"Tell me where it is," de Warenne pressed eagerly, but the hooded man shook his head and laughed.

"Oh no, my friend. The solution is not so easily revealed. I do not know the whereabouts of the tunnel entrance, only the identity of the man who will discover it....Hugh Pendarrow."

"Hugh?" the knight scoffed, "He is still away fighting in the Holy Land."

"Not so. He returned three days ago," the other countered. "When he hears that his beloved Aleys is in danger he will not hesitate to ride to her rescue. Whether or not he will succeed is up to you."

The hooded man found the prospect highly amusing and

threw back his head, laughing. The black cowl fell away and de Warenne could not suppress a shudder at the sight of the features thus revealed. The left side of Astaroth's face was perfectly formed, possessing an unearthly beauty. The other side was cruelly misshapen and distorted as though moulded of a waxen substance that had then been partially melted. Astaroth did not miss the man's reaction and as he pulled the hood back up, his crooked lips twisted into an ugly smile.

"Does my face displease you, proud mortal? Think on, for worse will befall you if the fair Aleys is not handed over to me at the proper time."

This concluded the meeting and the knight strode over to the door, jerking it open. He glanced back to say something else to his loathsome tormentor, but the words stuck in his throat for Astaroth had disappeared. De Warenne was not a man easily frightened and yet he swallowed audibly before leaving the room and slamming the door behind him. He mounted his horse and galloped away from that dreadful place, spurring his mount unmercifully.

Silence fell over the cottage and after several minutes had elapsed, the door to a small storeroom opened and two people crept out. One was a young knight in his early twenties, the other a black-haired woman, a little older. They had overheard all that had passed between de Warenne and his unearthly visitor and the former, at least, was highly disturbed.

"Vahishta, what in God's name is going on? Who was that dreadful man and what was all that talk about a contract?"

The woman hesitated. Hugh Pendarrow loved Aleys and would not hesitate to do anything necessary to rescue her, but how much of the truth would he believe? Hugh had hurried home to help rescue his betrothed as soon as he had heard of her peril. He had been met by Aleys' maid, Vahishta, and persuaded to eavesdrop on a secret meeting between an unseen knight and his awful ally where he had heard a great deal about contracts and penalties without understanding what was really going on.

"The feud between the de Warenne brothers is the root cause of all this." Vahishta began, "Robert and Guy have hated one another since childhood."

"I know. They even fought over which of them was to be Aleys' guardian after her father died." Hugh replied.

"Both went with King Richard to the crusades and won great honours. The story is too long to tell now, but Guy bought me in a slave market. As ever, whatever Guy had, his brother wanted and when he returned to England, Robert brought me back to be maid to his wife. After her death, I served Aleys."

"In the Holy Land, both brothers dabbled with powers best left alone. You would call it witchcraft. One barely escaped, though not unscathed. The other came to an arrangement with a servant of the Great Adversary. A contract was signed in blood and a soul was promised in exchange for wealth and worldly power. Usually the person signing the contract forfeits his own soul when the time comes, but Astaroth is Grand Duke



of Hell and he bends the rules on occasion. This time he has agreed to accept Aleys' soul instead. Guy kidnapped Aleys two weeks ago. Robert demanded her release and when Guy refused, he laid siege to the castle. Unless he can locate the secret tunnel, I fear he has no chance and on Midsummer Day, Aleys will be handed over to Astaroth."

"I don't believe I'm hearing this." Hugh said, partly to himself. "You are saying that Sir Guy has sold his soul to the Devil and that some demon from Hell will come to take Aleys' soul in his place?"

"You think I'm making it all up? No, Hugh. There are more things in heaven and earth than mankind can find words to explain. Hell and the Great Adversary do exist. Astaroth and others like him will trade wealth and power for souls as long as there are foolish mortals prepared to take the risk. You have to stop him, Hugh!"

"Even if this rigmarole of yours is true, why me?"

"Because Astaroth himself has foretold it. He cannot oppose you directly; de Warenne will do that and he has the forces of magic at his disposal."

"And how am I, a mere mortal, supposed to fight the forces of Hell? I'm a soldier, not a magician."

Vahishta refused to be provoked: "I am not without certain powers myself and I can call upon others to provide you with the weapons you will need."

"I don't know. It sounds so.... incredible."

"Would you believe Sir Robert if he told you the same thing? Go to Castle Brak and speak with him. I will join you there later."

Vahishta left then and Hugh caught a few hours sleep in the old cottage before setting out again. The road to Castle Brak followed the flow of the river before leaving the forest and cutting away across a broad valley towards the high ground on which the castle had been built. Hugh left the road, taking the longer route via the lake known locally as Darkmere. He thus approached Castle Brak from the east and he reined in his horse on first sighting the forbidding place that was Aleys' prison. The castle stood atop a granite outcrop some distance from the mere. A deep moat surrounded it and to the south lay the encampment of Sir Robert's forces.

Keeping his horse to a canter, Hugh headed towards the encampment. He made no attempt to conceal his presence and it was not long before he was spotted by a look-out. The word was passed and a solitary rider rode out from the pavilions. As the other drew nearer, Hugh recognised Aleys' guardian, Sir Robert de Warenne; a florid, thick-set man with thinning red hair and a close-trimmed beard. Hugh's first impression was that the other looked ill and had lost a lot of weight since their last meeting. Sir Robert greeted his former squire and then got straight down to business.

"You're here because of Aleys, I presume."

"I came as soon as I heard." Hugh replied, "What is going on, my lord? The villagers can talk of nothing but kidnapping, the Devil and black magic."

This was not exactly the truth, but for some reason, Hugh did not think it wise to mention Vahishta's involvement in all of this.

"For once, the gossip mongers are close to the truth," the older man answered, a worried frown creasing his already lined face. "My foolish brother has been dabbling in black magic and he means to offer Aleys as a blood sacrifice. She's imprisoned within the castle and look at it!" He flung out an arm to encompass Castle Brak. "The place is impregnable and the siege could last for years before Guy would surrender."

Then it was true. All that Vahishta had said .... Hugh had to believe her incredible story now, for Sir Robert could surely have no reason to lie.

"I fear there is little you can do here." Sir Robert continued.

"With your permission, my lord, I would like to search for the secret tunnel that is supposed to lead to the castle... if it exists."

"It exists all right, though even my damned brother does not know its location. It may come out anywhere in the forest. I've had men out looking day and night without success, but you are welcome to join them, Hugh."

The two men parted company then; Sir Robert to rejoin his men and Hugh to resume circling the castle. No-one hindered him and he was able to pass quite close to the outer walls without coming under attack from the defenders. Considering the circumstances, Castle Brak was unnaturally quiet. No soldiers patrolled the battlements or stood watch on the towers. The castle might have been deserted; Guy de Warenne fighting a solo battle to defy his brother's efforts to thwart his evil purpose.

"Did Sir Robert confirm what I told you?"

The speaker was Vahishta, who had somehow managed to catch up with him unseen. Hugh dismounted to walk beside her.

"More or less. Vahishta, do you know the secret way into the castle?"

"I found it years ago. Hugh," her tone changed, "Before we go any further, there is something I must say. I am very fond of Aleys, but taking on a creature like Astaroth is going to involve considerable risk and my help carries a price," Vahishta warned. "I will ask for nothing that will not be within your power to give, but you must swear a sacred oath that whatever I ask for, will be mine. Even if I demand a man's life."

Hugh opened his mouth to protest at this, but Vahishta did not give him time to speak.

"I promise you that whatever I ask will harm neither Aleys nor yourself."

Hugh considered, weighing up his chances of success with and without Vahishta's aid. His conclusion was that there was no choice to make and when Vahishta asked him to swear the oath, he reluctantly did so.

"Vahishta, if you already know about the tunnel, why didn't you go to Sir Robert with the information?"

"He would never have given me what I would have asked for," came the candid response, to which Hugh found that he had no answer.

Having agreed to Vahishta's terms, Hugh expected to set out immediately and was most surprised to be told that the woman could do nothing more until sunset on Midsummer's Day. While this was cutting things fine, she assured the worried young knight that time would be no problem. Her own magic would lengthen the night hours, giving Hugh the time he would need to penetrate the castle and find Aleys. For sake of appearances Hugh spent the rest of that day and the next searching for the hidden tunnel, often in plain sight of Sir Robert's men. Not until the appointed time did he see Vahishta again, when she led him to the far shore of Darkmere.

Black water touched with silver lapped the shore, reflecting the stars set in the clear, cloudless sky. Motioning for Hugh to stay well back, Vahishta stood facing the lake and raised her bare arms above her head.

"Nimue, sister of the waters, I have urgent need of you. In the name of the Sleeping King, I beg you answer."

A breath of wind stirred the grass and a soft sigh was carried on the breeze. Far out on the lake the water rippled and parted as a shining, white-robed woman with long, golden hair and eyes like stars, rose from the depths and walked across the water to the shore. Hugh stared, dumb-struck.

"Hail Vahishta, sister of the ring. Why have you summoned me?"

"Dire peril threatens," Vahishta replied as the other stepped onto the grassy bank, "And I have need of the Treasures that Merlin guards."

"Indeed." Nimue's tone hardened. "You know well enough that the Thirteen Treasures must lie hidden until the Sleeping King awakens. A time which we both know has not yet come."

"The time you speak of may never come," Vahishta argued, "King Richard is dead and his brother John holds the throne. England totters on the brink of a new Dark Age and the Great Adversary's power grows strong. Have you not heard?"



The Earl Marshal lies stricken by a strange sickness and if he dies now, before his time, a servant of Darkness will replace him as the king's chief adviser. De Warenne is Astaroth's pawn and they will plunge the country into eternal darkness unless they are stopped."

Nimue hesitated: "I am forbidden to intervene in the affairs of mortals and I am aware that you are only able to act indirectly."

"De Warenne has until midnight to hand over his ward to Astaroth, otherwise he forfeits both his life and his soul. This mortal is willing to hazard his own life to rescue the maiden, but he needs the Sword of Rhydderch and the Mantle of Arthur if he is to succeed. If he does, Astaroth's meddling will be ended and England will be safe."

"England's safety is indeed my purpose." Nimue agreed, "Yours..."

"Our aims coincide this once."

"Very well," the other conceded, "the mortal may borrow the Treasures, provided they are returned before the bell of Avalon strikes twelve."

"Agreed."

"Then wait here and I shall bring the Treasures to you."

Nimue turned and walked across the water towards the centre of the lake. She sank slowly beneath the surface and was gone.

"Who was that?" Hugh wanted to know when he was again capable of speech.

"Nimue? Some call her the Lady of the Lake. It was she who bound great Merlin in enchanted sleep to await the return of the Sleeping King."

"She's not..."

"Mortal? No, Nimue is of the Faerie folk. She is forbidden to meddle in the affairs of mortals, but Astaroth's presence threatens to destroy all that she has worked for. The Treasures, together with a ring that you must steal will get you into Castle Brak and give you victory over the enemy. Don't worry, my own magic will delay the tolling of the bell until your purpose is fulfilled."

"This is the Sword of Rhydderch." Nimue told Hugh when she returned from the Faerie realm hidden within Darkmere. "Use it carefully, for when you so will it, the blade may be transformed into a magical flame. Here is the Mantle of Arthur, that renders the wearer invisible. Remember, mortal, these Treasures must be returned to Darkmere by the last stroke of midnight."

"It will be done," Hugh promised, accepting the Sword and the Mantle. Nimue exchanged a few words with Vahishta and then walked out into the mere once more and vanished from sight.

"Finally," Vahishta told Hugh, "You must steal Sir Robert's most prized possession - a ruby the size of a pigeon's egg, set in a large gold ring. The jewel is the size of a man's fist and Sir Robert keeps it in a locked chest, the key to which he always wears on a chain around his neck. He has no idea of the jewel's worth or how to use its magical properties. All that concerns him is that his brother prizes the ring above all else and so it is never far from his side. The chest is bound with spells that I have never been able to overcome, but touch the lock with the sword of Rhydderch and they will be broken. Before you ask, Hugh, Sir Robert would never consent to lend you the jewel even for a few hours. Not even for Aley's sake. His fear that it might fall back into Guy's hands is too great. That is why you must steal it. Wearing the Mantle of Arthur will make you invisible but you must still take great care. People will be able to hear you even if they cannot see you."

With Vahishta's warnings echoing in his ears, Hugh set out for the encampment. Sir Robert's pavilion was easily identified as it was the largest of the cluster and situated in the centre. A guard had been posted outside and as Hugh watched, Sir Robert himself left the pavilion to have a few words with the man. Hugh took advantage of the distraction to sneak inside,

giving the interior a cursory glance before getting down to the serious task of searching thoroughly, all the while keeping one ear alert to the barely audible conversation taking place outside.

Hugh found what he was looking for beneath the bed; a small wooden chest banded with iron and set with an ornately inscribed lock. Setting the chest on the floor, he drew the Sword and touched the tip of the blade to the lock. Light flared and metal sizzled as the magic imbued within the blade did its work. Returning the weapon to the sheath, Hugh lifted the lid and took out the jewel. It was as Vahishta had described, and Hugh marvelled at the size and beauty of the blood-red ruby that pulsed with a light and life of its own. He secured the jewel within a pouch tied to his belt, closed the lid and returned the chest to its place of concealment. With luck, Sir Robert would never notice his loss.... at least until Aley was safe and the ruby could be returned.

Hugh was about to leave the pavilion when the entrance flap lifted and Sir Robert came back inside. It might have been a trick of the light that made the other look so old and sick with worry. In the short space of time since Hugh had last seen him, he looked to have aged thirty years, becoming lean and gaunt while the nails on his be-ringed hands had been bitten to the quick. He sat down on the bed, only to get up again and resume pacing. Hugh knew Sir Robert was no coward and yet he could smell the scent of his fear.

Moving slowly and carefully, Hugh edged towards the exit, all the while feeling highly conspicuous and praying that the magic mantle would not let him down. Sir Robert turned away and Hugh ducked out through the flap, almost colliding with the sentry on the other side, hit the ground and rolled out of the way. Of course the guard heard the noise but though he looked round, he saw nothing and Hugh made good his escape. Away across the open ground he raced, slowing down only when he reached the cover of the forest. Clouds had covered the sky and made it difficult for him to pick his way to the tree where Vahishta had said she would wait for him. The woman was nowhere in sight and Hugh risked calling out her name in a loud whisper as he dared. Belatedly he realized that Vahishta could not see him and he slipped off the mantle.

"I had to be certain it was you, Hugh," Vahishta responded, stepping from behind the gnarled, twisted trunk of a massive oak tree. "Have you the jewel? Good. No, I don't need to see it..... your word is good enough."

"This is the entrance to the secret way?"

It was indeed. Vahishta had obtained a lighted torch from somewhere and by its flames Hugh saw that what first appeared to be a natural fold in the tree trunk was actually the narrow entrance to an underground tunnel. He felt like kicking himself, for he had passed the tree himself that very day. From a cramped chamber within the oak, a series of steps led down into a passage that was just tall enough and wide enough for an armoured knight to walk through erect. Hugh insisted on going first and for little over a mile they walked, the going slow, for the tunnel was rough and uneven.

"How are we doing for time?"

"Fine. Just keep straight on until you reach the entrance to the castle dungeons."

Further on, the way began to slope upwards and before long, Hugh came to a dead end as the tunnel ended against a blank wall.

"Where to now?" Hugh called back over his shoulder. There was no reply. "Vahishta?"

He turned round, raising the torch high above his head as he did so. Of Vahishta there was no sign, though the torchlight revealed that the direction he was to take was upwards. Hugh did not dare waste time looking for her and pressed on. Iron rungs had been driven into one side of a narrow shaft and Hugh was forced to sheath his sword and discard the torch before beginning the ascent. Up and up he went, climbing steadily, reaching blindly for the next hand and footholds and





testing each before trusting his full weight to them. He found the top of the shaft by the simple method of hitting it with his head.

The trapdoor refused to open and Hugh was forced to resort to the magical properties of the Sword to blast it into smithereens. He climbed into a dank, dark cell, the door to which also had to be destroyed. Hugh left the dungeon and soon found out that his first impression of the castle had been correct. The place was deserted; no gaolers in the dungeons, no soldiers, no servants....no-one. Where was he supposed to start looking for Aleys? Vahishta might know, but she was nowhere to be seen. Hugh wondered about that, for the woman had apparently wanted this adventure to succeed as much as he did himself. Then there remained the mystery of the price that was to be demanded at some point in the game. A game that was turning into a bizarre form of hide-and-seek.

At long last came a room that was not deserted; a medium-sized chamber with a large log fire blazing in the hearth and a young woman lying fast asleep on a nearby couch. Aleys! Hugh rushed to her side, meaning to rouse her and get out, but the sleep was not natural and Aleys could not be roused.

"I was expecting my brother to come himself," said a voice from behind, "My mistake - I should have known he would find someone to do his dirty work for him."

**S**ir Guy de Warenne looked nothing like his brother. He was taller, leaner and his hair was silvery white, though he could not have been more than forty years old. His eyes were the same colour as the steel blade in his hand and the duel that followed was inevitable. The two knights were evenly matched and what Hugh lacked in experience, he made up for in greater agility. Suddenly, the noise of fighting was interrupted by the deep toll of a bell. It was the added spur Hugh needed, for he recognized the warning that it was almost midnight. The deadline had almost arrived and he launched an attack born of desperation. Drawing on the Sword's magical properties, he caused it to spit flame. Guy pulled back to avoid being burned and in that moment, Hugh twisted the blade from the other's hand and lunged forward to finish it. Guy rolled under the

stroke and as Hugh came at him again, Vahishta suddenly materialized between them. The Mantle of Arthur dropped from her shoulders and both combatants froze.

"Get out of my way, Vahishta," Hugh warned the woman.

"I want his life, Hugh," Vahishta said quietly. "It is the price we agreed ... even should I demand a man's life."

"You're mad!"

"Any life," she persisted, "As promised on your sacred oath."

Vahishta raised her right hand and light flashed from the ruby ring adorning her middle finger. The ornament looked vaguely familiar, though Hugh could not quite place it. There remained the problem of his honour and conscience, and the young knight could not forswear his oath.

"His life is yours," he conceded. "Aleys' safety is what matters to me and I am taking her out of here."

"Well said, Hugh!"

Everyone turned towards the door at the sound of a new voice and Sir Robert de Warenne strolled in. So far as Hugh was concerned, his arrival could not have been better timed.

"Don't look so surprised, Vahishta. One of my men saw you uncover the secret way and I followed you at a discreet distance."

"Oh, my God, no!" Sir Guy cried out despairingly, "Another few minutes and Aleys would have been safe!"

"Safe from you and Astaroth? I hardly think so." Hugh retorted.

Sir Robert laughed; "Speak of the devil and he arrives on cue.... The Grand Duke of Hell has come to claim his prize."

Suddenly there were six people present instead of five. Four pairs of eyes turned towards the hooded newcomer, only Vahishta taking no notice and using the few seconds' distraction to best advantage. Astaroth had centre stage and he stood between Aleys and Hugh, the latter desperately afraid that all his efforts had come to nothing.

"I demand payment, sir knight." Astaroth held out his right hand, though it was towards Sir Robert that he reached.

"I thought..." Hugh was understandably confused.

"You thought that Guy de Warenne had sold his soul to me and wished to exchange it for the fair Aleys." Astaroth roared with laughter at the deception. "Poor, foolish mortal. Robert it was who signed the contract and tried to avoid fulfilling its conditions by offering another in his place. Guy learned of the amendment and kidnapped the girl in a vain attempt to prevent her falling into my clutches. Dear Hugh! You were an innocent catspaw throughout."

"Robert did not know the whereabouts of the entrance to the secret tunnel and the laws governing human/devil relations kept Astaroth from telling him." Guy explained, seeing that the Grand Duke was enjoying the joke too much to condescend to do so. "Similarly, Astaroth could not enter Castle Brak and abduct Aleys because she was not party to the original contract. Robert has to hand her over personally."

"Did you know about this all along?" Hugh turned to Vahishta.

"Yes, Vahishta," Astaroth echoed the question, "Your scheming has intrigued me. I counted you among my enemies. Could I have been so wrong?"

Outside, a bell tolled the second stroke of midnight.

"Who can fathom the purposes of a daughter of the djinn?" Vahishta observed, "You may never know, Astaroth. Your time is almost finished and you must return to your master."

"With the prize, Vahishta. Do not forget the prize."

"Indeed not. One way or another, the contract must be honoured."

Within the space of this exchange, the duellists had changed. Astaroth and Vahishta were now the main protagonists and Hugh was slowly realizing that he had been as much Vahishta's pawn as Sir Robert had been Astaroth's. Yet if he did not understand the full purpose of the deception, Sir Guy suddenly concluded that he did.

"A soul for your master." Vahishta continued, "The only question remaining is whose?"

The third stroke of midnight and Astaroth appeared to





Sarah.



grow, enveloping himself in a shroud of darkness as he did so. Seeming to fly, he swooped down on Aleys, only to be repulsed by a magical wall that defied his evil.

"While you were pre-occupied with your grand entrance, I took the precaution of drawing a magical circle about Aleys. While she remains inside, you cannot touch her." Vahishta enlightened him. "A djinn does not possess a mortal soul and Hugh is adequately protected by the Sword of Rhydderch. You do not have much of a choice, Astaroth."

"A soul is a soul; whose, makes little difference."

The Grand Duke was not unduly perturbed at being thus thwarted.

"There is still my brother!" Sir Robert, staring his doom in the face, was panic-stricken. "He tricked you once before and unlike Aleys, he is no innocent."

"Unfortunately, my dear Robert, your brother is beyond my reach. What a pity you no longer have the precious ruby: it might have saved you. I see your game now, Vahishta... protecting both Aleys and your former master... very clever."

Robert stared wild-eyed at the ring on Vahishta's finger and now Hugh recognized it as the one he had earlier stolen from the pavilion.

"You managed to alter its size before Robert stole it, ten years ago," the Grand Duke went on, laughing again, "the mortal fool never once guessed its true purpose...!"

The bell tolled a fourth time.

"And now my greedy mortal, are you going to come quietly?"

As Astaroth came towards him, Sir Robert's nerve broke and he made a desperate lunge towards Aleys, seeking to drag her from the protective circle. Hugh and Vahishta were too far away to stop him and Guy it was who tackled his brother and brought him down scant inches from his goal. They rolled over and over, locked in desperate combat. Yet before either could resolve the struggle, Astaroth was upon them and all three were lost in the swirling darkness.

After long, tense moments, a bell chimed and the darkness contracted in upon itself and drained away through the floor. Even Astaroth's vile stench dissipated into the air and with him, he took his contracted soul. Guy de Warenne remained, pale and badly shaken, but alive.

The following silence was finally broken by Hugh demanding of Vahishta: "Is it finally over?"

"Almost. I know I owe you an explanation, Hugh, but it must wait until you have returned the Treasures. I have counted five bells... that is the sixth. Take the Sword and the Mantle and throw them into the lake."

Hugh did not need telling twice and was on his way even as the seventh bell tolled. Vahishta's spell was fading and time was returning to normal.

"What will you tell him?" Guy wanted to know, watching the other run.

"The truth."

"I hardly think he's ready for that." The knight said wryly, "I've known the truth for years and I still find it difficult to accept."

"Trust me."

"Don't I always?"

When Hugh returned to the main hall minutes later only Vahishta was there, sitting in a chair by the fire. She held two goblets filled with wine, one of which she handed to the young knight as he joined her.

"Guy has taken Aleys back to her room. She will sleep off the effects of the drug and be fully recovered by morning. Now, I suppose you want the whole truth and nothing but? I don't blame you and I would understand if you refused to accept that I acted from necessity."

"You're not... human... are you?" Now that he had the chance to ask his questions, Hugh was unsure where to begin.

"Not fully. I am a daughter of the djinn, servant of this ring and forced to serve whoever wears it. Robert stole the ring from his brother years ago, hid it and placed spells of protection about it; spells broken by the Sword of Rhydderch. When Guy kidnapped Aleys and threatened his plans, Robert was

desperate and so he made mistakes. Astaroth told him that you would find the way into Castle Brak and he pinned his hopes on your success. He saw me helping you but did not think to question my true motives."

"But if Aleys was safe inside the castle, why go to all the trouble of supposedly rescuing her?"

"Because the ring would then have been lost to me forever. Only by recovering it could I be truly free. All the time Robert believed himself safe, he kept the ring well hidden. As I said, he then panicked and took it with him to the pavilion. You stole it and I took it from you in the tunnel, along with the Mantle of Arthur."

"I still don't understand why Astaroth couldn't take Guy's soul."

"For the simple reason that Guy's soul does not reside within his body and has not done so for ten years. My purpose tonight was threefold: to keep Aleys safe, recover the ring and stop you from killing Guy. I'm sorry I did not tell you the truth earlier, but I could not risk it."

"Astaroth also said something about it not mattering whose soul he took. If that's true and he is forbidden to interfere in the affairs of mortals, then everything you told Nimue about England being in dire peril was a lie."

"Of course." Vahishta was quite unabashed, "Otherwise she would never have permitted the use of the Treasures and they were vital to my plans."

Hugh tried to digest all this and failing, drained the goblet. Moments later he yawned prodigiously. The goblet fell from his hand and he slumped unconscious in the chair, for Vahishta had planned this too.

"He will remember none of this when he awakens." Vahishta said to Sir Guy who - unseen by Hugh - had returned to stand in the doorway.

"Vahishta the djinn will be no more and only Lady Vahishta de Warenne will remain."

"There is still Astaroth to be reckoned with," her husband reminded her. "Twice now we have thwarted him and he has all eternity to plot his revenge."

"He will need to wait that long," Vahishta replied, raising the ruby ring and causing the treasure hidden within it to shine in the light. Guy covered her hand with his own and smiled:

"Indeed. Our souls are what he wants. You do not have one..."

"And yours," Vahishta finished, "is safe in my keeping."

**Nicola Ashton is 33 years old and is a bank clerk. She has been writing full length science fiction/fantasy books for about twenty years. "Conspiracy of Souls" is her first published short story.**

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# JUSTICE

by Brian Stableford

In the days when Swabia was one of the five grand duchies and the *Schlegerbund* were a great power in the land there came to the town of Ravensburg a man named Nikolaus Makri, who had fled from Lombardy upon a tide of dark rumours which alleged that he was overactive in the cause of change and progress.

Swabia's nobles considered theirs a more advanced realm than decadent Lombardy, and so Makri was made welcome there - all the more because he claimed to be a wise and artful physician, and also to be expert in the amputation of limbs. In Swabia the work of surgery had long been the prerogative of barbers rather than physicians, but the march of progress had reduced the barber's guild to a mean and powerless thing. The status of barbers was so reduced that they had little enough success in persuading certain stubborn souls that it was evil for a man to cut his own hair, so their protestations failed to inhibit the ardent Nikolaus from plying his saws and razors as he wished. He became a well-respected man in Ravensburg, and became enthusiastic for the improvement of his adopted town.

There was in Swabia at this time a very violent highway robber who had also come to the duchy from Lombardy. His name was Zorillo, and the depredations which he practised around the shores of Lake Konstanz had become the stuff of legend. The *Schlegerbund* finally condescended to send a company of mercenaries to pursue him, and he was eventually seized by them while hiding in a cheesemaker's shop on the outskirts of Ravensburg. He was quickly brought to trial before the three magistrates of the district.

Knowing that he was doomed, Zorillo confessed all his crimes and pleaded guilty. This was a wise move, for Swabia was at that time the most civilized region of the Empire, and the law of the land was meek enough to licence torture only in cases where the guilty would not admit their crimes.

The presiding magistrates laboured long and hard to find a way in which they could increase the robber's punishment, for he was guilty of many heinous crimes against the property of noblemen as well as the murder of a few lesser folk, but the law was quite clear. They could pass no harsher sentence on a robber who confessed his guilt than to order that he be hanged by the neck and choked by slow degrees. No doubt they considered the possibility of an accusation of heresy, which - if substantiated - would permit Zorillo to be burned, but however reluctant the robber had been to abide by the laws of the Church, he had never openly questioned their propriety, nor had he ever been so vile as to play the cutpurse with men of the cloth.

Thus it was that Zorillo was sentenced to go to the mer-

ciful gallows with his limbs unextended by the rack and his joints uncrushed by the boot. The voices of his victims, whose gold had never been recovered, were loud in proclaiming that such gentle treatment could not be an effective deterrent to other Lombard thieves, who would surely flock across the border in ever-greater numbers. The fact that Zorillo had become something of a hero to the poor folk who were not worth robbing only amplified these fears.

When Zorillo's trial was over, however, Nikolaus Makri visited the frustrated magistrates, and told them that he knew of a way by which the bandit's suffering might be prolonged within the letter of the law. He said that he had been encouraged to speak in the interests of serving justice, and in the interests of encouraging the thieves of decadent and hateful Lombardy to stay at home.

Makri proposed that the magistrates should allow him to make a small incision in the lower part of Zorillo's throat before the robber was sent to the scaffold. This, he explained, would allow a trickle of air into the felon's lungs even when the rope was drawn exceedingly tight, and might prolong the the hanged man's agony for an hour or more.

The magistrates were sceptical at first, objecting that a slit throat was the easiest way of all to die, but when Nikolaus Makri had demonstrated his technique on a stray dog they were convinced, and gave him a licence to proceed, so that the vengeful ends of justice might be seen to be properly served in spite of the gentleness of the law.

When the time came for him to meet his destiny Zorillo objected most strenuously to the making of the incision, declaring that it amounted to unlawful torture, but the magistrates gleefully replied that Master Nikolaus was a certified physician, whose vocation was to discover how life might be prolonged. They pointed out to the miserable villain that wise men everywhere were quite agreed that the actions of physicians - no matter how painful and nauseating they might sometimes seem to the ignorant - could not possibly qualify as torture.

The robber could not be persuaded to agree with this judgement, and he appealed to the Bishop of Ravensburg, asking that the Church should intercede on his behalf. Alas for Zorillo, the Bishop - whose own wealth had been some-



what reduced by Zorillo's zeal for theft - agreed with the magistrates that the ends of justice would best be served by letting Makri proceed with his experiment.

When he heard this, the condemned man fell to cursing everyone on sight - but he dared not call upon the devil's name lest he provide grounds for his own burning. The magistrates, being good and pious Christians, had not the least fear of his feeble invocations. Indeed, they were convinced that God would wholeheartedly approve of the lesson which they were about to offer to all those who might contemplate interference with the divine ordering of men's estates - which clearly insisted that the best of men were destined to be rich and the worst of them poor.

**W**hen the appointed hour came, the incision in Zorillo's neck was duly made by the ingenious Makri, before the hangman's rope was made secure. Then the robber was hauled most carefully upwards, and made secure to the gibbet, so that the weight of his body might cause the noose to tighten by patient degrees. The whole town had heard of the physician's bold scheme, and everyone was there to see how long it took for the condemned man to die, and what wriggings and writhings he might contrive to make in the meantime. How many there were who wished to see the experiment fail - in addition to Ravensburg's three barbers, who had an understandable prejudice in the matter - it is impossible to judge.

There was much discussion regarding the longest time that it had ever taken anybody to die upon a Swabian scaffold, and veterans of a hundred public executions were earnestly consulted as authorities upon the matter. Some said fifteen minutes, others twenty, and one ancient crone swore by her rotting teeth that she had seen the infamous murderer Homstein kick his legs for half an hour before the inevitable stink gave evidence of his dying spasm. Wagers began to be laid as to how long Zorillo would last, and there was such excitement generated by these speculations that marked candles were brought from a nearby Benedictine monastery in order to measure the result - for all of this occurred in the days before the invention of mechanical clocks.

The most popular predictions were clustered between forty minutes and an hour, and within five minutes of Zorillo's suspension more gold had been wagered upon the length of his life than he had ever stolen. Whatever redistribution of Swabia's wealth he might have contrived by the manner of his life paled into insignificance by comparison with the redistribution which would be accomplished by the manner of his death.

When the first of the twenty-minute marks upon the candle-timer was passed, a great cheer went up from the crowd. Zorillo was still writhing and kicking his feet in a thoroughly vigorous fashion, and though his eyes were bulging from their sockets he was still capable of looking wildly about. He was still trying to speak, though the cord about his neck would not permit it, and a sorrowful priest was heard to remark that this enforced silence would at least keep his soul safe, by preventing any weakening of his resolve to refrain from calling upon the devil for aid.

As the second twenty-minute mark was passed in its turn there was a greater cheer, and loud applause for clever Nikolaus Makri - especially from those who had wagered on a longer interval. Zorillo was quieter now, and his bulbous gaze had ceased to roam the crowd, but his fists continually clenched and unclenched in a strained and calculated manner which was clearly not the work of some posthumous agitation, and his bowels had not yet let go of their burden to signal the moment of expiry. The gamblers were counting seconds now, calling them in scrupulous unison, held taut by the knowledge that fortunes might be won or

lost on the passing of each moment.

By the time that the hour mark was passed the chanting of the seconds had begun to waver, because the greater proportion of the wagers laid had by then been settled or given up for lost. Only the boldest of the speculators had put pledges on times in excess of the hour, and though another cheer went up at the melting of the mark it was somewhat muted by comparison with the last. The crowd were no less inclined to marvel at what Makri had accomplished, but there was now less praise and more anxiety in the exclamations, for Zorillo had again commenced to struggle fiercely against the rope which held him, as though he sought by furious effort to hurry on the moment of his release.

If the robber's efforts were indeed directed to that end, they failed him. He continued to dance, and his dance now seemed as uncanny as it was desperate. Though his eyes were blank and fixed, his blackened tongue still moved like a slug within his gaping mouth, and in the quieter moments there were those in the crowd who believed that the hanged man was somehow contriving to make audible sounds. More than one was later to claim that they heard words, but German is the kind of language which, when whispered, can easily sound like the gaggings, gaspings and gurglings of a strangled throat.

**W**hen another hour had elapsed, and Zorillo still moved on the end of his rope, the wonderment of the crowd was beginning to turn to horror. None had dared to bet on such an interval as this, and the minds of the watchers began to turn - as the minds of men inevitably do when they are faced with the unprecedented - to the fear that some awful magic might have been involved in procuring Zorillo's amazing longevity. Nikolaus Makri was still standing by the magistrates, proud as a peacock to see what he had achieved, but he was now the target of uneasy glances from many of the humble folk - who were ever inclined, in their ignorance, to suspect physicians of secret sorcery.

When a further twenty minutes had elapsed without Zorillo being reduced to stillness or incontinence, the magistrates conferred, and then sought a second opinion from the Bishop, who was also in attendance. They decided, though not without a certain reluctance, that enough was enough, and that justice had now been seen to be done. The public executioner was commanded to go forward and grip Zorillo's body firmly round the waist while lifting his own feet off the ground, so that his extra weight would further tighten the noose and hasten the robber's demise.

The executioner obeyed, but he quickly let go, saying that he could not bear to feel the hanged man struggling so fervently to throw him off. While he was making this excuse he suffered the consequence of standing too close to the gibbet, for Zorillo caught him with a well-directed kick which knocked him sprawling on the ground. Some of those in the crowd cheered, but the greater number were too anxious to be amused. The suspicion was abroad that the devil's hand was in the business now, and there were many who were willing to suppose that Zorillo might have secretly turned heretic after all.

"You have done your work well enough," said one of the magistrates to Nikolaus Makri. "Now will you tell us, if you please, how much longer it will take this wicked man to die?"

But Nikolaus Makri did not know, and he could only shake his head. An anxious frown had appeared upon his face.

All of a sudden, the hanged man began to shake and quiver in a new way, as though he had been seized by a bout of wild laughter which, because it could not escape from his sealed throat, was forced to eddy and echo inside him.



"Well," said the bruised and bitter executioner, picking himself up from where he had fallen, "there is one sure way to put an end to the farce." So saying, he took a dagger from his belt, and thrust it hard into the hanged man's breast, intending to puncture the heart which was still beating within.

But the wound inflicted by the executioner refused to bleed, and the hanged man skilfully kicked his persecutor in the head again, sending him sprawling in the dirt for a second time.

"It is not Zorillo!" cried a voice from the crowd. "It is a demon sent by the Lord of Hell to possess his body, and there will be a dire time in Swabia while it hangs undying there!"

When this was said the priests and friars who were present became angry, for they alone had a licence to detect the hand of the devil in earthly affairs, but they made no shift to offer an alternative explanation. Even the bishop seemed fearful, and he was evidently beginning to regret that he had given his approval to an action which, however virtuous it seemed, had no obvious precedent in the scriptures.

The crowd began to melt away, as the common people began to run to their homes, anxious for the consequences of what their masters had wrought.

Now it proved quite impossible to approach the hanging body, for if anyone stepped towards it, its booted feet would lash out very fiercely - and Zorillo did not seem to be in any way aware of the fact that the hilt of a dagger stood out prominently from his breast, set firmly in a deep but unbleeding wound.

The face of the hanged man was very dark and bloated now, but the protruding eyes did not seem sightless - instead they seemed possessed of a stare more wrathful than could ever been worn by a man who had not a strangling noose around his neck. While the sun stood high in the sky the baleful glare was difficult enough to bear, but when sunset stained the western sky blood-red Zorillo's eyes became so fierce and fiery that there was not a man in Ravensburg who dared meet that stare. In the end, even the priests and magistrates went away, and the watchmen whom they set to guard the gibbet stood with their backs to the unsleeping man who still danced beneath it.

When night had completely fallen, the hangman was instructed to creep up on the gibbet under cover of darkness, with the object of cutting Zorillo down so that his body might be dealt with another way. He agreed to try it, for he was a man of courage and he had not forgotten or forgiven the indignities to which he had been subjected. But when he approached the scaffold, as stealthily as he was able, he was kicked yet again, more savagely than before. He instantly resigned from his position.

All through the next day, and the next after that, Zorillo hung unquietly where he was, with his bulging eyes staring horribly at everyone who passed him by. Although his face began to show sign of corruption, with white maggots creeping upon his darkened flesh, still his body squirmed and still his legs lashed out if anyone approached. No one any longer doubted that the adversary who took delight in all the sufferings of men had been moved by Nikolaus Makri's cunning ploy to take too keen an interest in the duchy of Swabia - and if any proof were needed that Satan was abroad in the land, fevers broke out in the town, and animals in the fields began to sicken.

When a week had passed, and the rotting body on the gibbet still gave every indication that there was unnatural life in it, Nikolaus Makri was seized by the constable and taken to the prison, where he was swiftly tried for sorcery, and convicted in spite of his denials.

He complained very loudly that he was a physician and a devout follower of Christ - and this refusal to make a proper confession of his foul sins entitled his judges to torment him until he acknowledged the justice of their action. His limbs were stretched until the joints popped, his skin was vigorously raked with iron combs, and his eyes - when their stare began to remind his uncomfortable questioners of the staring eyes of the undead Zorillo - were melted and sealed by boiling tar.

When this business was concluded, Makri should by law have been taken to the place where Zorillo's scaffold stood, and properly burned in order to make certain that his soul could not be darkened by any failure of his hard-won repentance, but this was not possible while the demon-inhabited corpse still hung there. So Ravensburg's churchmen and lawyers were forced to continue their lately-established tradition of innovation, and in view of the fact that the position of public executioner remained unfilled, they ruled that the guild of barbers must supply a razorman to cut the physician's throat.

The guild of barbers was only too happy to oblige, and the three candidates drew lots to see which one would be afforded the honour of carrying out the execution.

When the act had been done - more neatly than any mere physician could ever have managed it, the perpetrator proudly claimed - the bloodstained body of Nikolaus Makri was taken to the gibbet, and laid down nearby. All the free citizens of the district were called to public prayer, and the Bishop piously led them in imploring Jesus the merciful to undo what his direr enemy Satan had contrived, allowing Zorillo to go to that eternal rest - or perhaps eternal torment - from which the people of the town had tried so foolishly to keep him for a while.

But in the morning, it proved that the hanged man was still staring, and still squirming, and that the plague had still to run its horrid course throughout the region; and so the people of Ravensburg learned that once the common order of things has been deliberately upset, it is not so readily restored.

Doubtless this single example of the dangers of tampering with tradition was of little significance in the greater scheme of things, but it contributed in its own small way to that great tide of misfortunate events which eventually caused Swabia to turn its back on the dubious causes of justice and progress, and which ultimately swept the entire duchy on to the rubbish-heap of history.

**Brian Stableford lives in Reading, where he worked as a university teacher before becoming a full-time writer. His recent novels include "The Empire of Fear," "The Werewolves of London" and "The Angel of Pain." He is a prolific contributor to reference books on SF, fantasy and horror fiction and is currently helping to update *The Encyclopaedia of Science Fiction*.**











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# REPRISE

by Marise Morland

Jim was finding it difficult to believe that he had ever enjoyed driving. The journey had been tedious, monotonous, and filled with unwanted thoughts - almost as if someone had lined up his memories like a row of children's bricks. Each event seemed so separate, so distinct. The car radio was playing a golden oldie, the very song which he and Faith had been dancing to when he'd proposed to her, twenty years ago. Strange how vivid the memory of that particular dance had become...but, he conceded, it was only natural to think of it now. He and Faith had just embarked on a holiday to try and save their ailing marriage.

Jim glanced at his wife, mistrusting her silence. Any moment now she'd start talking about his mistress. She would say things which were destructive, untrue, or just plain silly; but she would say them. She couldn't face rejection, and therefore couldn't credit Jim with free will. Instead, she'd carefully built up a false premise: Jim the weakling, Jim the victim of infatuation, Jim in search of lost youth. As long as she continued to believe this, Jim saw no point in arguing with her. He hadn't left her, and that should have been enough.

"Slow down," said Faith.

Jim ignored her, flinging the Porsche 911 around the misty Welsh lanes, wishing he'd never agreed to go on the holiday. He might have known it wouldn't solve anything.

"I expect your floozie likes you to drive like a maniac," his wife remarked. "Big macho man. Always trying to impress her."

"We've been over all this before," Jim began wearily.

"Always spending money on her," Faith continued remorselessly. "Why don't you admit you're completely under her thumb, and always have been? When are you going to stop living in cloud cuckoo land?"

Jim tried to close his ears to the well-worn tirade. Irritably, he jabbed at the radio, and the music was replaced by a news bulletin.

*"Women peace protestors held a demonstration outside Thanatos Pharmaceuticals earlier today. They claim the company is engaged in germ warfare experiments. A spokesman for Thanatos has denied this."*

Faith turned the news off. "Slow down!", she said.

Jim ignored her, gunning the big Mercedes down the motorway in the outside lane, wishing he'd never agreed to go on this holiday. It was never going to solve anything.

"I expect your lady friend likes you to drive fast", his wife remarked. "And this car must look so good outside her home. Always trying to impress her."

"We've been over all this before," Jim began wearily.

"Always wasting money on her," Faith continued remorselessly. "Why don't you admit you've been under her spell since the day you met her? When are you going to wake up?"

Jim tried to close his ears to the well-worn litany. Yawning, he pushed a button on the car radio, and the music was replaced by a news bulletin.

*"Two women were arrested today after cutting through a perimeter fence at Thanatos Pharmaceuticals. They allege the company's activities are hazardous to their families and to life in general. A spokesman for Thanatos said the plant's safety record was impeccable."*

Faith turned the radio off. "Slow down," she ordered.

Jim ignored her, treading hard on the accelerator as he negotiated the Jaguar round a hair-pin bend. He wished he'd never come on this damned holiday. It would never solve anything.

"I expect your tart likes you to drive like a lunatic," his wife remarked. "I bet she chose this car for you. Just to show she's the boss."

"We've been over all this before," Jim began wearily.

"Always wasting your money on her," Faith continued inexorably. "Why don't you admit you're completely besotted with that woman? When will you grow up? It's later than you think!"

Jim allowed the well-worn phrases to drift past his ears. He didn't like the way his memories remained static and bright and somehow incomplete. There was a twilit haze at the edge of his mind, something he struggled to bring into focus while his wife's voice droned venom. But there were some things one was not allowed to recall, some sections of memory that had been firmly set aside. For instance, the fact that in one last desperate attempt to make their marriage work, he and Faith had gone for counselling. The waiting lists for Relate were endless, but someone had told them about the latest state-of-the-art therapy: computer symbiosis. To achieve this, the participants were linked to a life-support system. Then, through direct neural input, the computer simulated an environment in which husband and wife would begin to discuss their problems. The data was processed carefully and, shortly after waking, the couple received a prognosis and - if relevant - a schematic for their future together.

But this time there would be no waking.

The computer had many times declared the program to be syntactically incorrect - or, in plain terms, said that nothing was being achieved. But in the absence of any human order to the contrary, it had continued to run the sequence. The skull of the long-dead controller grinned at the predicament of Faith and Jim, safe in their sealed capsules, protected from the airborne waves of death which had spread from Thanatos Pharmaceuticals.

The self-maintaining system commenced another re-run. Music played, and a car roared down a highway. Jim decided that he didn't really enjoy driving anymore.

Marise Morland is a native of High Wycombe. Her previously published work has mostly been poetry. Her poems have also been read on local radio. She has had SF stories published in *Auguries* and *Practical Computing*. Most recently, she co-scripted "Time and Mrs Jones" for the Sunday Times comic strip supplement.



# The Crow and the Dragonfly

By David Raven

*In the latter part of the year an easterly wind blows hard above the passes of the Mournful Mountains. When the sun slides down into the western sky and the shadows grow long this wind expects to find itself alone.*

At sunset on a day in late autumn in the Year of the Wild Pig it found, to its surprise, that it was not. Far down below, bordered by towering walls of stone, stood a warrior in jet with the insignia of scarlet flame, and a warrior in silver, emblazoned with rainbow devices. In all the Mournful Mountains there were but these two men, and it was their intent that one man should finish the night alone.

By sunset they had fought for three hours and there was still no end to it in sight. Their breaths came now in quick, shuddering gasps, every one dragged up from protesting lungs as if it might be their last. Their arms felt as if they had been ripped from their sockets and their bodies were lacerated by a mass of minor wounds. They matched each other in skill and strength and hatred, so well, in fact, that neither could gain the advantage. It would require exhaustion or an error on one man's part to finish this, as both were acutely aware.

Toran Maarkaad and Paul L'Quonn, the Crow and the Dragonfly, knight-champions of the cities of Ebon Fire and Prism's Jewel; one man with hair as dark as the night, and the other's as pale as a winter's dawn. Their cities were thirty miles apart; their births separated by a minute twenty-five years before, but their worlds were otherwise as distant as that of the moon and the sun.

To the west lay Ebon Fire, a glittering tower of obsidian and crimson, a fortress legend claimed was formed of blood-red flame and endless shadows. From here the Legion of the Crow rode to the Eternal War. To the east stood its opposing twin of Prism's Jewel, a castled tower of shimmering marble, sometimes flecked with alabaster, sometimes by all the colours of the spectrum, though said by some to be carved from unmelting ice inlaid with opal gems; the fortress-home to the Company of the Dragonfly. Ebon Fire and Prism's Jewel, at war since time before time began, and on this day their greatest champions had chosen to ride out alone to the mountains.

They had turned into the wide bend in the pass at the same moment, and from then there could be but one outcome. They had both gaped and blinked at the man they had met as if confronted by an impossible mirage. This could not be true. This had been so long in coming, and now, for it to happen this way... They'd laughed and dismounted instantly. Immortality beckoned. The man who survived this battle would be spoken of in awe ten centuries from now.

Three hours later they circled each other like wolves contesting the leadership of the pack; bloody, torn and sweat-stained, their swords held two-handed since one arm alone could no longer support the weight. They had cast aside their shields, the metal buckled and twisted, the emblems of flame and light ruined by a hundred raking cuts and a thousand hammered blows.

Peering through the gathering gloom for an opening, Toran Maarkaad saw a brief smile flicker over the face of his lifelong enemy.

"Weariness turning your feeble mind, L'Quonn? Is that your problem? Don't worry, I've a remedy here for all kinds of tiredness. In fact, when I've finished with you, you'll never be tired again."

"In another five minutes," L'Quonn said carefully, "we won't be able to make one another out at all. What do you say to calling a halt while we can still see?"

Maarkaad shook his head. "I can see. Begging for mercy now that you're too tired to continue won't help you. You knew the rules of this game when we started - surrender wasn't one of them."

L'Quonn replied by striking faster than a fork of lightning. Maarkaad parried it, though not easily. It cost L'Quonn heavily to make the point, but the Crow drew back. Surrender was obviously not what his adversary had in mind.

"What then?"

"I'm suggesting we halt long enough to light some torches, that's all. I wouldn't want to miss your expression when I cut out your evil heart."

"Hmmm..." Toran Maarkaad considered this. "All right, you might have a point - except that I intend to be the one doing the cutting. But...we've neither of us any torches. What did you have in mind?"

"There's a clump of canewood back down the pass. The wood burns brightly and slowly. Well, slowly enough for me to finish this job, anyway."

"No wood burns for that long, lily-skin. But, very well, we'll light your canewood. Any man of Ebon Fire would find it a pleasure to dispose of vermin like you by the light of holy flame..."

This ritual of obligatory threats temporarily concluded, they cautiously lowered their swords to their sides.

Their riding spurs rang sharply on the stone as they walked slowly down the narrow pass, keeping as far apart as was possible, and each warily watching the other for a single false movement. Bone weary, each devoutly wishing he had thought to wear the heavy armour that would have given him the edge, the irony that not a soul was witness to this greatest single combat of the Eternal War was not completely lost on them.

After walking a short distance L'Quonn languidly gestured ahead. "Here, I think. Yes... there it is."

The clump of canewood rose out of the shadows. In the twilight, the thick stems wavered and entwined like dancing snakes.

They contemplated these stems for some time. Canewood was notorious for its resilience, and this was an old, tough bush. To cut torches from it would mean expending energy neither could spare. And their swords were battered, dulled and chipped; each had only a few good blows left. If one man's blade should snap on the cane he would be at the other's mercy.

L'Quonn cleared his dry throat. "Suppose we simply set fire to the bush? Not much room to manoeuvre here, I'll



grant you, but a man with skill should manage..."

"Then how will you cope?" growled Maarkaad. He dug into a pocket in the leathers below his light weight *cuisse*. "I have a match. Let's see if I can strike a fire to kill you by."

The Dragonfly tapped his open mouth in an extravagant yawn.

"Your threats are so damned boring, Maarkaad, you know? Still, I suppose it's a trait of your gloomy people. No imagination. No humour."

"If you mean we don't spend our lives in a continual orgy of depravation, unlike your kind, that's true. My people believe in duty and sacrifice."

L'Quonn laughed nastily. "I see. Still cutting up the virgins on the sacrificial block, are we?"

The champion of Ebon Fire favoured him with a murderous glance and struck his match against the stone. In the same movement he tossed it onto the canewood, where the withered growths of summer fern were dying on the stem. The dry growth caught fire instantly and fanned by the sharp wind quickly took hold of the main bush. Maarkaad's high-boned features took on a look of intense pleasure as the flames leapt into the sky. In such a light the cropped black hair and the thin line of beard around his jaw gave him the appearance of some militaristic Satan.

He smiled crookedly at L'Quonn. "Well, let's to it, then."

L'Quonn cursed himself silently. What had he done? Nothing like the sight of a flame to give an Ebon Fire creature fresh heart. He might have guessed! But...there was also the chance of an over-confidence...

**T**hey faced off again. Now it was a waiting game. Neither could afford the strength to launch an all-out assault, and so they circled endlessly, watching and waiting for the split second that would mean glory for one and death for the other. Their spurs sometimes clinked faintly, the fire crackled, the wind keened through the passes, but these were the only sounds in all the silence of the mountains...until a low, rumbling roar came echoing through the walls of stone.

"Did you say something?" L'Quonn asked suspiciously.

"That," Maarkaad's eyes never left his opponent for an instant, "came from behind the bush we've just set alight."

A second, louder roar came. Not only louder but alarmingly near.

"What kind of animal makes a noise like that?" enquired L'Quonn.

"An angry one," said Maarkaad. "A very angry one."

Still they circled one another.

The third roar, when it came, shook the surrounding rocks, bouncing layers of sound from one dark wall to the other, the reverberations continuing until they brought loose stones and shards of rock tumbling down onto the two swordsmen.

"Truce?" asked L'Quonn.

"Truce," agreed Maarkaad.

They had come to their senses only just in time. The canewood, now blazing merrily, suddenly exploded towards them, sending flaming darts spitting lethally in a dozen different directions. From the mouth of a black cave burrowing deep into the motherstone a face fixed with all the images of hell thrust itself out into the night. Claws scratched and clicked around the cave entrance as the beast gained purchase, and a body of slime and scales was levered painfully forward. The monstrous head on a bull neck was scarred and pitted; leprous sores oozing with a sickly yellow pus covered it from snout to spiny collar. But the gimlet eyes were clear and blazed with more venom to the square inch than either man would have believed existed; two shining stabs of scarlet that were fire and rubies and burning poison all in one. The mouth opened and revealed a space as wide as the chasm between the stars. Maarkaad and L'Quonn might have been staring into a netherworld pit that promised screaming death and eternal damnation. The thick tongue of a lizard flickered over multiple layers of teeth shaped like curved daggers. It crawled forward another six inches and the reason for its glacially slow pace became clear. Behind the head was a great deal of body.

The tongue darted across the teeth once more, and a strangely contented rumble emanated from the vast depths beneath the pus, the scales and the slime. From just beyond the edge of sanity, to where a man might once be tempted to glance but then draw back with a horrified shudder, came the realisation that the rumble was not the growl of an animal at all. It was a word. And the word was:

"Fooooood..."

"Ye gods," whispered L'Quonn weakly. "It speaks."

Maarkaad attempted to phrase a sarcastic reply, but words failed him.





The monster heaved itself a few inches further forward. The greater part of its bulk still lay within the hole, though the stench of rot swept free and rolled over Maarkaad and L'Quonn. Until then they had been transfixed, as much by curiosity as fear; lulled by the beast's funereal progress into believing it could not possibly catch them. The stink of decay pushed them back as far as the opposite wall.

"It's a worvan'troth," said Maarkaad hoarsely, covering his face to mask the smell. "We thought they were extinct centuries ago."

L'Quonn tugged loose the bandana from his stream of pale blond hair and used it to cover his own mouth and nostrils.

"This one seems to be well on the way to extinction. It's rotting on the bone."

"No, no," Maarkaad coughed, "they were always like this. The sorcerers of Starvox built them from the corpses of plague victims to guard their strongholds in the mountains. But the last sorcerer was put to death two hundred years ago and all his works destroyed... This worvan'troth must have escaped into the cave systems below the mountain and survived here ever since."

L'Quonn nodded. "You would know that, of course. The Starvox sorcerers came from Ebon Fire, didn't they? By the lights, Crow, your people have wandered down some strange and evil paths..."

Maarkaad snarled and gripped his sword, ready to restart the battle regardless of the beast edging ever closer. It was then he discovered that worvan'troths were equipped with two tongues. The second, coiled back into the abyss of a throat, snapped out like an unwinding spring with blinding speed and hurled its target against the mountain wall, wrapping him in a reeking mass of wet, adhesive flesh. Only quicksilver reflexes saved Maarkaad from being yanked from his feet and hauled towards a grisly death. As he was encircled he brought his sword up automatically, catching it between his own body and the slobbering, sticky girdle of tongue. The sword had been blunted by the day's fight, but fear can work miracles, and Maarkaad twisted the blade into the flesh with a terrified ferocity. A spurt of foul blood showered him, the worvan'troth gave a yelp that threatened to start another fall of rock, and whipped its tongue back in. Rumbling, whimpering and snarling to itself, the beast glared poisonously at Maarkaad, blood streaming from between its

fearsome rows of teeth.

Out of breath, near exhaustion, Maarkaad and L'Quonn slid to a halt beside their mounts, having decided discretion formed the better part of valour and beaten a hasty retreat back up the narrow trail.

L'Quonn fanned away the putrid fumes rising from his enemy and grinned.

"Nearly made an intimate acquaintance with the inner workings of a worvan'troth, eh? Food for a thing of corruption. How appropriate!"

Maarkaad, resting and panting on his saddle, looked up and gave a harsh laugh.

"The joke's on you, L'Quonn." He pointed to where the monster lay back in the darkness. It was coming, but they were far out of reach of the lethal tongue. "The road to your city of debauchery lies back that way - you've got to pass the beast to get home."

L'Quonn's ever ready grin froze on his face.

Maarkaad smiled again. "Never mind. You don't have to do it - after all, you have three options. You could climb over the mountain - it's only a sheer face a mile up. No? Well, you could ride fifty miles out of your way - albeit into country mostly occupied by my troops. Or last, even better, you spend the night with me and taste the hospitality of Ebon Fire."

L'Quonn grimaced and Maarkaad chuckled.

"None of those appeal? Well, then, I suppose you'll just have to squeeze past the worvan'troth. Or kill it."

"You think I could not?"

"You? Hah! Try slipping past my troops, L'Quonn, and ride fifty miles out of your way. That's your best bet. We'll finish this business of ours another day. Of course, I could promise you a fascinating night at Ebon Fire..."

"Except that I wouldn't live to see the dawn." Maarkaad gave him a mocking bow. "Thank you, no. I'd rather take my chances with the worvan'troth. Besides, no knight of Prism's Jewel ever feared a beastie from the murky past of your people."

Maarkaad's hand tightened on his sword hilt.

"The Starvox sorcerers were not from Ebon Fire, L'Quonn, as you know only too well. More likely they came out of the drunken revels and depravities of your kind."





L'Quonn shrugged. "As you please. Either way, I'll rid the two cities of this potential hazard. You'll be sure to inform the good citizens of Ebon Fire that a knight of Prism's Jewel fought on their behalf, won't you? While you - uhh - rode away..."

Maarkaad's eyes bulged with fury. A trick! And he'd fallen for it hook, line and sinker. How could he possibly turn away from this now? It only needed L'Quonn to live and carry the worvan'troth's head back to Prism's Jewel and Maarkaad would be a laughing stock. Quite apart from the question of honour, in his present wretched state he could hardly deny that they'd met. There was nothing for it. He found his shield and pulled his sword.

"Come on, then, you loud-mouthed oaf. We'll take the thing together."

L'Quonn burst into laughter. "Together? No one in the two cities will believe this. Not that we did something *together!*"

Maarkaad growled and left him standing alone in the darkness. L'Quonn considered leaving him to it for a moment, but only a moment. Then he, too, found his battered shield and set off after his enemy, and - he blanched at the thought - his new-found comrade-in-arms.

Scattered though they were, pieces of canewood still burnt brightly as Maarkaad and L'Quonn walked steadily down the pass. Flames gnawed hungrily at the wood and cast an uncertain light into the shadows, though it took the two men some time to make out the dark bulk of the worvan'troth. They heard it before they saw it; the weight of its body causing bony scales to whisper and scratch as they passed slowly over the stones. L'Quonn doubted the ability of their swords to tear through the scales, doubly so since the two of them were so tired.

The worvan'troth's bloated form came to a complete halt. The armoured rolls of fat engulfed the narrow road, barely leaving the width of a man's body between it and one unscalable rock wall. Fifteen minutes laborious progress had brought it less than twenty feet from the cave entrance.

At least, thought L'Quonn, it can't outrun us. If we can't kill it, I'll hack the damn tongue off. And if I can't get my horse past it, I'll walk home.

"Our best chance is to take it from both sides," he said quietly to Maarkaad. "Edge past it while I draw its attention."

Maarkaad snorted. "You must think me soft in the head, L'Quonn. You edge past it if you feel so inclined. I'm quite prepared to keep it occupied."

The tongue fired out again and L'Quonn caught its sticky lash on his shield. He fell back with the impact but in falling clubbed the tongue awkwardly with his sword.

The worvan'troth let out another ear-splitting yowl and Maarkaad, seeing himself safe, squeezed by as the beast shivered in anger and pain.

L'Quonn stood up breathlessly. "Twist your sword in under the scales. I'll try for the eyes. Come on, man, the tongue can't reach you there."

Maarkaad still hesitated. "I'm not so sure about this, L'Quonn. Nothing the sorcerers of Starvox made was ever as harmless as this. It must have another method of trapping victims. In fact, the more I think of it, the more I seem to recall..." He started to pull away. "L'Quonn - we have to get away from here. As far away as we can..."

L'Quonn looked at him through the darkness uncomprehendingly and stayed unmoving. Maarkaad had turned to run but it was too late. With the piercing shriek of a steam whistle and a hiss like cold water thrown onto a blast furnace, a writhing mass of tentacles flooded from beneath the beast and struck them with the force of a tidal wave. A

soft, wet mouth had split apart in the worvan'troth's belly and the world was filled with a thousand lashing, tearing whips of flesh.

Flayed and stunned, Maarkaad and L'Quonn were hurled into the rock wall with no more effort than if they had been a child's toy dolls. In twenty seconds they were beaten half-senseless by the whirlwind ferocity of the attack. It felt as if the skin were being systematically peeled from their bodies in strips, or as if they had plunged headlong into a bath of hot coals then wallowed in boiling salt to cauterise the wounds.

For a minute longer they flailed at the storm of limbs, resembling lunatics beset by a swarm of hornets, then swords and shields were swept from their grasp and they were helpless. Bludgeoned to the ground, curled into balls to protect themselves as best they could, they felt the longest of the tentacles beginning to wind around them, withdrawing and tugging hopefully. It intended to pull them in; two crunchy, tasty meals for a hungry worvan'troth.

Dragged forward a foot, blind with blood and darkness, L'Quonn felt yet another blast of pain sear into his lacerated body. Through a gaping hole in the ruins of his leather tunic his bare skin had been thrust up against a smouldering branch of canewood. He scrabbled for it, burnt his fingers and lost it, and in desperation grabbed again. This time he held on, a little lower beneath the burning point, though his wrists and arms were crushed by the living black cords binding them and they had begun to lose all sensation. Frantically he tried to dash his face against his arms to wipe the blood from his eyes and regain his sight.

Maarkaad, too, twisted helplessly one way and another, feeling the last of his strength draining away. The mouth of the worvan'troth came ever closer. In a moment of utter despair that left him screaming with frustration, he was dragged over a sword but could not get a hand to it. If he'd had it and could have moved one last time he wasn't sure whether he would have hurled it at the monster or at L'Quonn.

As he thought of him, L'Quonn said something, a few words that started as an inaudible croak and ended on 'sword.' Maarkaad shouted at him to repeat it.

"I said, if I buy us a few seconds could you get to a sword?"

"Yes...yes."

"Then don't waste any more of your strength fighting it. Let it pull us in."

If they had been as fresh as the morning dew and able to fight it like tigers, Maarkaad doubted whether they could have resisted anyway. As it was, they were hauled inexorably towards the appallingly wide mouth and he still struggled futilely. It was impossible not to. It was just as impossible to believe that a lily-skinned son of Prism's Jewel could save their lives.

The tongue, sliced and bloody-black, slid out to meet them, licked itself over Maarkaad, then withdrew and slurped expectantly. And the beast was growling with excitement. The vibrations of "Fooooood" rumbled through the air and shook the stone beneath them.

They were so close to the worvan'troth now its waves of fetid breath flowed over them as thickly as liquid, the outpourings of the foulest sewer in creation. With his hazy sight L'Quonn could see five things: the mouth, the teeth, the tongue and the two tiny points of scarlet.

*Sweet Lord of the Lights, he prayed, let this work. If it doesn't I'll be ground down to innards and bones before I can spit.*

With the last dregs of his strength he plunged the red hot



spear into one glittering point of scarlet. It was the best throw of his life, and the scream that followed it nearly burst their eardrums. The terrible roar echoed ten miles through the mountains, shaking loose landslides of rock from Ebon Fire to Prism's Jewel.

As the worvan'troth in its agony released its hold, Maar-kaad was on his hands and knees searching frantically for the sword. The enormous mouth was wider still as he turned with the weapon in his hands; the gullet a target he couldn't miss. He roared himself as the pain of movement seized every muscle, then hobbled forward on lifeless legs. He had only hatred left; his strength was gone and if the one thrust proved false the likelihood was that they would still be engorged by a ravenous worvan'troth.

*Up into the throat, into the brain. This toe-rag from Prism's Jewel can't outdo me where skill is concerned.*

He rammed the sword home. It was enough. The dam burst and they were engulfed in a sea of glutinous blood. The worvan'troth's death cry tore the night apart and even with their hands squeezed over their ears the noise hammered them senseless. The twin cities rocked on their foundations and men fifty miles away swore they could hear the echoes five hours later.

Finally, it was over. The beast was still and the last threshing and shuddering done. Maarkaad and L'Quonn lay gasping in a stream of vileness, too weary even to crawl the few yards to dry ground. Eventually, Maarkaad found the strength to roll over and shove his face into L'Quonn's.

"That," he said hoarsely, "was very nearly a halfway decent fight."

L'Quonn managed a wheezing laugh. "Great God. The man has a sense of humour after all."

Two hours passed before they could drag their battered bodies back up the pass to their tethered horses. They hauled themselves into the saddle and each stared wordlessly at the other's shadowy form.

"Next time we meet..." L'Quonn ventured at length. Maarkaad finished it for him. "This will be forgotten." The Dragonfly smiled. "And I'll still cut your heart out." "Not unless you can do it with your head sliced from your body," said the Crow mildly.

They sat there silently for a few seconds longer, then, without another word, each wheeled his mount and rode away into the darkness. But something had changed...perhaps.

David Raven admits to having had "the usual multitude of abysmal jobs: failed mushroom farmer, failed rock musician, failed book club manager etc." He is now a newsagent and sub-postmaster on deepest darkest Salisbury Plain, praying for an end to the recession, while, "of course, working on the novel that's going to take me away from all this..."

He has been writing, he says, for the last two or three hundred years, and started to have some success in 1988, mostly outside of the SF field. In 1989, he won the Blake Trophy for his story "Strangers on Trains" and also had stories published in specialist small press as well as in *Samhain*, the horror magazine.

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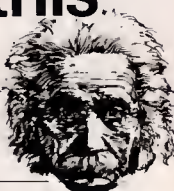
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# The Door



Sarah

"You'll be warm enough, my chickadee?" I queried, sinking my red mouth into the soft crook of her elbow.

"Oh, warm enough," she said, in her dance-dress and her fur hat, leaning out of the window of the train to Leningrad.

"You'll not be hungry, lovey-dovey?"

"Mother, how can I be hungry, when you have given me salt fish and a loaf of bread?" And she drew away and left me pouting scarletly; and tossed her tiger-tail, and slid up the glass between us.

Under the high station canopy the great engine panted, and she with her wide painted eyes suddenly melted the window open and leaned out, the train even then parting us further. "Mother," she called back, "Vladimir will come to sort the door."

And she waved once, with her white hand and arm.

I am home in my blue cottage that hides behind the winter trees, and zigzags, crookedly, four storeys high. I have lit in my bedroom a fire of applewood, sweet-scented; I send out the gift of its blue smoke across the frozen plough-scarred land, and pull around my thin shoulders the old coat of Athelstan.

Who is Vladimir? Why will he come to sort the door?

I pull on black silk gloves with ostrich cuffs, and buckle tight my boots. I climb down the three narrow staircases, and stand outside the only outside door. It's faded, weather-bleached wood, touched with worm.

The telephone rings.

"Hello?"

"It's Vladimir."

"Yes?"

"Cherie says, I must come to sort your door."

"No, don't come. Please don't come."

"I come tomorrow."

I close the door.

I cook borshch and coulbiac. I caught the salmon with my bare hands in the autumn, but now it's frozen. My black cat, by the hot iron range, picks the pieces from the bones.

I have a feather duster, fluffy pastels on a thin cane stalk, and I go from door to door, up and down the cottage, dusting. I wear a black housecoat. I do not know which door Vladimir comes to sort. This one squeaks, this one has chipped paint, this one the latch fails to lock, this one jams on the threshold if I shut it tight. I have a complete imperfection of doors.

All day Vladimir doesn't come. All day he doesn't telephone to say he's at the station.

At sunset, when the sky's alight with orange, I lay the oak fire in the library and as the outdoors fades orange flames flicker up inside. I bath in bubbles and smooth my skin with creams and slide into long sequins; tiara up my greying hair, paint my lips fresh wicked red.

The moon's above. Full moon, yellow moon, mountainous moon. My black cat's beside me, purring, perching on the open sill. An owl hoots; hoots again. Oh, delicious sound!

Knock knock. Three floors below. Shivering in the chill, I pull on Athelstan's old coat, buckle tight my boots.

Inside the door, in the dimness of the hall, I think, *what's*



# Specialist

by Maggie Freeman

outside? I don't want to open. *I'm not opening any doors, I think.*

Knock knock.

The keyhole's big. I crouch to stare out. I see the belted waist of a full-length coat. A line of chest and hip, and a hand that dives into a pocket and pulls out a white card (bright in the moonlight) which it slips into the letterbox.

It falls beside me. I pick it up and take it to the light.

*Vladimir Higgins*, it reads, *Door Specialist*.

Knock knock.

I crouch to the keyhole again. "Go away," I shout. "I don't want you. I told you not to come."

He crouches opposite. "Cherie asked me to come," he shouts. "She said you needed me."

"She's wrong," I yell. "Go away."

Then the door opens, without the handle turning. Silently swinging in across the stone-slabbed floor. Not squeaking on its hinges.

Vladimir's on the doorstep. He's very tall. He has black close-cropped hair and pointed ears, a shaven chin. Deep-set dark eyes. His coat's fur-collared and earth-coloured, long down below his knees and turned up around his neck. He wears black jeans and heavy walking boots, huge on his long feet.

"I apologise," he says, "for disturbing you. But I have a contract with Cherie, paid in advance." He holds out to me a piece of paper, which I take warily.

I back up towards the light.

His name is at the top, printed; then mine, and my address, in block capitals. The date, three days ago. The details: *to attend to all doors as necessary. Extra 5% discount for cash. Paid in full.*

"You're late," I say.

"It's a long way."

"You walked?"

"Yes."

"Your tools are in that bag?" He has a brown canvas bag with leather handles on the top step behind him.

"Yes."

"You'd better come in."

He pauses to take off his coat, for there's a line of white snow across his shoulders. As he shakes it outside, I say, "I hadn't realised that it was snowing."

"Not here. There was snow falling on the other side of the hill."

Yet there is the full moon, and glittering stars across the sky, and the brown ploughed fields sparkle with frost. And I know for sure that he has come from the Other Side.

"Are you hungry?"

"I have come a long way."

"You said before."

We eat in the kitchen. As I dole out the borshch and coulibiac on to old star-silvered plates he warms himself against the iron range. I understand; I know my blue cottage is cold. I place two chairs beside the range. "Sit down," I say, and I spread a white napkin across the lap of his jeans. I take off Athelstan's old coat, and hang it on a nail on the back of the door, beside Vladimir's. I give him his plate and





knife and fork, and sit down beside him to eat.

As he finishes, he says, "The bright sequins of your dress are reflected in the stars of your plate."

I adjust my tiara modestly, and pat the corner of my red mouth with my napkin. "Tell me," I say, making polite conversation, "about your profession."

But he's forking up the last flakes of pastry from his coulibiac. He gets up and takes his plate to the sink. "I'll begin," he declares.

I rise nervously. "There's woodworm in the front door," I point out. "Is that what you've come to treat?"

He stares at me deeply with his black eyes. "I have come to attend to all doors as necessary," he replies. "A little woodworm isn't my concern. Is it yours?"

"A door specialist doesn't treat doors?"

"One can treat doors in many ways. This kitchen door, for example - it needs nothing."

"But the paint is badly chipped."

"That doesn't matter." He wanders off into the hall and clatters up the wooden stairs, humping his brown bag beside him. "This door, though, needs considerable attention," he shouts down.

The door is the library door, white, four-panelled, grey-shadowed because the landing light is dim.

"The matter with this one," I explain, "is that it jams on the threshold. If you could plane a little off the bottom -"

"No. That's not what it needs."

"But -"

"Go through the door." His voice is strong; it needs to be obeyed.

When I go in I find the fire still flames orange. When I hold out my hands towards the heat I find that it burns cold. And the books all around, that line the walls, brown leather: all their learning is blocks of ice.

As I look round, I see, in the deep blue high-winged chair, the skeleton of Athelstan. Dried-up skin fragments still hanging from his jaw and cheekbones. This is strange, because when he died, oh, years ago, I followed local ritual and had his body cremated.

"Come out," orders Vladimir.

I glance once more at Athelstan. When we made our contract on that Caribbean shore, I did not fully understand the inadequacies of mortality. That though he was so handsome then, he'd soon grow old, and worse, his hot love would disappear and he'd be just cold learning. I wouldn't have believed that possible, when it was only through his learning that our union could exist.

"How do you feel?" asks Vladimir, as I stand beside him.

"Bitter," I say. "Cold."

"The door is warped," he says. "It does not tell the truth."

"It is because it is warped that it jams?"

"You have hot water?"

The kettle on the range is boiling. I bring it up the stairs. He has produced a black cauldron from his brown bag and he pours in the hot water. He sprinkles powders from five different vials, and strange scents rise with the curling steam.

"Try the door again."

"No. I am afraid." Athelstan's white bones are etched in the blackness in my mind.

"You must do so."

"I am afraid. You do it for me."

"No. That is not my job. You must do it yourself."

I sigh. When I chose humanity, I did not know there would be this constant responsibility. On the Other Side, so much is shared. There is community with others; together we make up a whole. It's a comfortable communion, relaxed, functioning together. There's nothing special about it. Nothing like that joy, that supreme bliss, that perfect one-to-one togetherness of Athelstan and me in love. Walking

along that beach, hand in hand, with the waves washing up to our feet - me so proud of being able to walk, wearing my first pair of buckled boots that he made me -

Vladimir says, "I think you can go in now."

I enter the library happily. Now the fire is warm. Athelstan's chair is empty. I can take books from the shelves and hold them in my hands and read their words comfortably, sharing the pleasure that we took together, even when he grew old and ugly and his passion was all spent. And for the first time I can accept that it was not his fault. He explained to me, out on the rock, as I lay beside him. "Zafina," he said, "you know that I'll soon grow old. You, too, if I do this thing" - I didn't understand then what growing old was. On the Other Side we don't grow old.

I understand now why humankind does. It's because they change. They are always wanting more, something bigger, something better, and they must accept personal oblivion for the future improvement of the species. Physical oblivion only; they live on in others' minds. It's a measure of the success of Athelstan's treatment of me that I remember him so well.

And that Cherie was born. There are no children on the Other Side.

I go out to Vladimir. "You have indeed," I say, "fixed this door. Will you come upstairs?"

We climb up to outside Cherie's room. Her door is white, four-panelled, grey-shadowed because the landing light is dim. "The hinges squeak," I explain. "I hate to open the door because the sound is like weeping. If you have a little oil in your brown bag..."

"No. That's not what it needs."

"But -"

"Go through the door." His voice is strong; it needs to be obeyed.

When I go in I find her room bare. The things Athelstan and I have bought and made, they're there: the smooth high bed with its coverlet of silk, all blues and greens and greys, the colours of the sea; the bookcase with its unread books; the oak chest carved with curving dolphins; the dressing table that belonged to Athelstan's great-grandmother, with its mirror that doesn't reflect Cherie any more, only me, in my fish-scale sequined sheath. She's gone, my beautiful girl, off to dance in Leningrad.

Cherie never learned to swim. She hated water. I'd take her to swimming lessons after school and she'd scream, and I'd long to dive in but I couldn't because of my boots - if I'd taken them off and people had seen they'd have been revolted.

I never let Cherie see. She never knew.

She was all legs and feet with her dancing. And me heavy-footed, leaden-toed in my callipered boots.

She has taken all of herself away to Leningrad. Not even an old shoe, a strand of her blonde hair - nothing remains.

"What can I do but weep?"

"Why should you weep for a faulty door?" asks Vladimir.

"For a door? No, it's Cherie I lament. Because she's rejected all that Athelstan and I can give."

"I was mistaken earlier. I do need oil. Olive or sunflower, it doesn't matter, so long as it comes from plants grown in warm sunshine."

When I return from the kitchen, he has broken dried leaves into a white mortar; he is grinding them into dust with a pestle. He takes the oil wordlessly, and adds it three drops at a time.

Watching his stooped, intent figure, his hunched shoulders, his long fluid fingers, I think, *he came only because Cherie asked him*. And so I know two things; first, that she



has contact with the Other Side - she's inherited that legacy from me - and that she cares for me with human caring. She saw that my doors needed sorting and sent Vladimir to fix them.

Vladimir, carefully, with fingertips, smooth the paste into the hinges. He stands back, a small smile on his thin lips. "Will you go in?" he asks.

I push the door gently. The hinges sing with the joy of morning, with Cherie's joy in dancing. And in that empty room I'm seeing her as she last danced on the stage. As the music of the hinges swells, I watch her flowing arms and legs, that share the magic of the ocean, rising and falling, so smooth, so rhythmically. She is indeed a daughter of a daughter of the sea.

And of Professor Athelstan. His learning is all in her knowledge of music and dance.

I go out to Vladimir. "You have truly fixed this door," I say. "Will you come upstairs?"

On the top landing there's a skylight, and the full moon spills her silver light through its glass. It's all brightness and black shadows there.

"It's my room," I explain. "The latch fails to lock."

"Are you sure that you want it to lock?"

"Sometimes," I say slowly, "when I'm lying in bed at night, I hear scufflings on the stairs. I think it is rats that have come in from the fields around, to be dry and warm, and I am afraid that if I sleep they will devour me. That is why I need to lock the door."

"You have a cat?"

"My black cat sleeps by the kitchen range three floors below."

"Enter in," he says, putting down his brown bag on the bare boards of the landing.

**M**y room. My human room. I love its bed and slanted white ceiling, I love its fire of applewood. I love its old wardrobes full of clothes. I love its views across the frosty plough-ridged fields, its closeness to the moon and stars.

I dislike its loneliness. My only contacts here are animals and humankind. I long for the sea.

It's only here, and in the bath, that I take off my boots. It's only here that I'm vividly aware of my deformity.

When I look back towards the unlatched door, Vladimir's leaning on the jamb. I say, "I am not sure that this door is faulty."

He says, "Yes, it is faulty. Human life is a matter of compromise. It has to be, with so much height and depth. Only with the Others is perfection possible. It's for you to decide."

I hesitate. I remember when I was an Other.

I sigh. "Athelstan and Cherie are both gone," I say.

"It's for you to decide," he repeats.

"Oh, leave the door!" I'm angry and impatient. "Leave things as they are. I'm adequately content."

"I can't do that."

"What do you mean?"

"Cherie has paid me to fix the door. It is a contract I cannot break."

"You mean - I have to choose?" And I think, Cherie's right, forcing me to this. I can't live on in two half-worlds. I must select a whole. I go out of the room on to the landing.

"Take off your boots," he orders.

I flush. I'm embarrassed. "I can't," I whisper. "I - I have a physical disability," I explain lamely.

"You must take off your boots."

His strong voice needs to be obeyed. I sit on the top step and slowly, with shaky fingers, undo all the buckles. Only Athelstan, who did the operation, has ever seen.





It's the bleeding that I mind most. You'd think after all these years it would have healed completely. No. Athelstan did everything he could, but even he had to admit defeat. "It's your true nature, Zafina," he said, fondling the nape of my neck, letting my long blonde hair fall across his bare hand and arm.

When I've finished unbuckling, I defiantly pull my skirt up above my knees. He says nothing when he sees my green-scaled skin, the legs so neatly cut and sewn by Athelstan. The scars on them are very slight; it's my fish-tail, divided and compressed into leather boots, that bleeds. I take off my boots. There are drops of blood now on the stair, dark blobs in the moonshine.

Vladimir says, "If you can't make the choice, the door will choose."

I am frightened. I am glad to abdicate responsibility. "Yes," I say, "Let the door choose."

"Give me five scales."

While I pull them off he cuts three grey hairs from my head with silver scissors. He takes a golden needle and threads the fishscales and knots the hair. He hangs the loop from the faulty latch. He says, "Go through the door. I will close it after you and make sure it latches."

I touch his hand nervously. "I will not see you again?" I ask.

"You will not see me again," he confirms.

"If anyone ever asks me for a door specialist," I smile, weakly, "I will recommend you."

"There will be no occasion. Goodbye."

I step into my moonlit room. The latch clicks shut behind me. Waves wash over me, wrapping me in wetness and darkness - dark blue, like Athelstan's chair -

There's water over my face. I can't breathe. I'll drown. Oh, Athelstan, Cherie, I'm scared -

Vladimir, it's gone wrong - the human side of me is here in the ocean -

My head's in air. There's a cool breeze. The moon's full and bright. It throws a silver path across the rocking surface of the sea.

I'm rising to the crest of a wave. It's curling over, it's crashing, and I'm part of the foam, rolling in. I'm swimming, my body's fluid and free. There are others around me, the same as me.

I'm back in a world without doors.

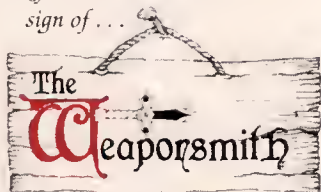
**Maggie Freeman has previously written two children's novels for seven to ten year olds, and she tutors adults in creative writing in Chelmsford. This is her first published short story.**

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# GORILLA

by Peter C. Davies

This gorilla came towards me. Now I am not using the word gorilla as a derogatory term. This was not some guy who looked ugly, but a real live, hairy, sweaty and exceedingly large member of the banana eating persuasion; about six hundred pounds to a first approximation. He was mean. I guessed that by the way he was beating his chest and making a sound like a car that does not want to start on a cold morning. At the risk of repeating myself I will mention again the fact that he was BIG.

Guess what I was armed with.

If you are good at lateral thinking and/or have a sadistic bent you may have come up with the right answer; a banana.

I could not quite believe what they had done to me this time. Perhaps you are wondering who 'they' are. I certainly was. Maybe I should tell you what had happened so far. Sorry to disappoint you if you are desperate to see this gorilla steal my banana and crush me to pulp. This will not take long and then we will be back to the next instalment in the life and times of..... well, that is something we have to sort out.

You see, as this gorilla came towards me all I could think about was the sheer injustice of it all. The whole of my life seemed compressed into three events. Firstly I was on a medieval battlefield trying hard to lift a two-handed broadsword with one hand, because my other arm was hanging by my side covered in blood and taking a holiday from the stress of everyday life. A most unsatisfactory way to come into existence compounded by the fact that the knight in front of me was not hampered by a similar condition and seemed to know just what he was about; decapitation. It would be stating the obvious to say whose head he wanted. I did the only thing I could think of in the circumstances. I left. Do not ask me how. I just wished hard enough. Try it sometime.

It happened. Suddenly I was in a plane. World War Two I think. But it could have been Three. I did not have time to worry about such minor details. You see the plane was on fire. You are probably beginning to see a pattern by now. Anyway the plane was in a dive. The crew had already left, with the parachutes. I jumped. Well, what else could I do? I had heard of these people who get lucky and survive falls from incredible heights.

On the way down I hit the ground. With a banana in my hand. So now you know as much as I did. Does it make sense? If so you are either locked away safely somewhere in a padded room or you should be President. No snide remarks please! Oh! One thing I forgot to mention; my clothing. None. Stark naked. Even on the battlefield I had been in my birthday suit. Not on really is it? I mean, to steal a man's memories and dump him into unspeakable danger again and again is bad enough, but to take away his clothes as well? That annoyed me.

This ape is still there so I suppose we had better deal with him.

In the few seconds remaining to me I looked around and discovered that I was in what I shall call a pocket universe. What I mean by this is that there was a definite boundary to the reality of the ground that myself and my hairy friend stood on. The patch of land was roughly circular, diameter about ten yards. I also realised that the last two locations had been similar. When I jumped out of the plane had I crossed the boundary from one space and ended up in another? I was not sure but I knew one check I could make.

I waved the banana at the gorilla. It took a painfully slow second before his dim brain realized what it was. It was my hope that he would want it more than he wanted me, or at least that he would work on the theory that he could have the banana first and me next. By the way, if people tell you that gorillas are not carnivorous then they have not seen the way this character was looking at me.

I gently tossed the banana over to one side and Hairy followed it as it arched towards the edge of our patch of land. He tried to catch it before it fell into the yellowy-grey abyss that surrounded us. He would have succeeded too if he had not been hit by a most ungentlemanly rugby tackle from which I just managed to disengage before he sailed out into nothingness screaming indignation and accusing my mother, no doubt, of anatomical impossibilities.

Poof! Old Hairy disappeared. I felt as though I had just scored a point. I was beginning to get a handle on this thing. Boy, was I wrong!

I turned my head towards the light. Too quickly, and the bright sunlight dazzled my eyes before the photosensors in the visor cut in and darkened the view. Must be one of the old Mark 5 versions, they had some trouble with response speed. Now how did I know that?

Still, no time to worry about that yet. Let us see what kind of a mess they have dropped me into this time.

Well it looked okay. I was standing on what appeared to be a small moon orbiting a large ringed gas giant. However gravity seemed to be about Earth normal. It was a phenomenal view. The planet looked like Saturn but so close I could have reached out and touched it. It covered about thirty degrees of arc and I could clearly make out fine band and storm detail. I hoped the suit was heavily shielded because at this close range I must have been deep inside the magnetosphere. The Saturn look-alike hung at about three o'clock with the sun/star slightly off to its left. It was a lot smaller than the Sun would seem from Earth which meant that this could be Saturn and I could be standing on Mimas or Enceladus. The only point that made me doubt my theory, apart from the fact the whole series of incidents actually indicated that I was strapped to a chair drooling in some asylum, was the high level of gravity. Although I could remember the names of some of Saturn's moons, which was surprising enough in itself, I could not remember their gravity levels. One thing was for sure though, they would



not be this high. Even Luna, which is about five hundred times more massive than Enceladus, only has a gravity of about one sixth earth normal.

I looked away from both planet and sun to see if I could make out any constellations. For an instant there was nothing and then stars appeared as clear as holes in a blackout curtain. It seemed as though they had been switched on just for my benefit until I remembered the faulty visor. I recognized some of the constellations, the easy ones like Orion and Cassiopeia, and then did not bother to look further. It did not prove anything. The gravity was all wrong.

Well at least this time I was not naked. That would have spoilt their little game. Instantaneous decompression in a total vacuum is not a pretty sight and has the somewhat nasty and unfortunate side effect of being fatal.

Then I saw the meteorite streaking straight for me. This just is not fair.....

**M**orning Tom. Say, what's this printout?"

"I dunno. I haven't looked at it. It just finished printing out. I guess it's the log file, isn't it?"

"Nooo! I don't think it is. What have you been doing this morning?"

"Oh, just loading some scenarios into the Virtual Reality Game."

"That's all?"

"Yeah. Well, I have had a line open to the Language Generation Module. Why, what's up?"

"The LGM. That's hooked into the experimental AI unit isn't it?"

"Yeah. I think it is. Look, so what?" Exasperated, Tom came over.

"Look at this print. Is your line still up?"

"No. I was only having a look to see how far they'd got and when we'd be able to use it hooked into the VRG. To be honest I shouldn't even have access. It's only because I know one of the programmers well..."

"Yeah. I know. She *is* pretty. Mmmm. Get in touch with them over at LGM and get them over here straight away. And get your line back up. Even if you have to cut across what they're doing. Tell them I gave you authority. And load a safe scenario. We don't want to lose this one."

"Right boss."

"Okay boss, we're up again...."

**A**aargh. Damn meteorite took my leg. And this suit doesn't have self sealing capability. Decompression. Christ, it hurts. I preferred the gorilla. Who needs this shit?

**S**cene's shifting. Too late .. this.. ti.. me.....

**L**OGFILE SEQUENCE... TERMINATION ERROR @  
SYS400

FATAL ERROR..... ARCHIVE FILES CLOSED

SYSTEM PARAMETERS CLEARED . . . . FATAL  
SYSTEM ERROR

END SEQUENCE INITIATED...LOGFILE CLOSED.

Peter C Davies is 27 years old and married. He has a degree in Engineering Science and has been an SF addict since he picked up Ursula Le Guin's *Earth Sea Trilogy* when he was 9 years old. He has been writing short pieces of SF for the amusement of his friends and himself, but only started writing for publication in January this year. Previously he has had a book, written in collaboration with his brother, published on the subject of genetics of breeding Peachfaced Lovebirds, but "Gorilla" is his first fiction work to be published.



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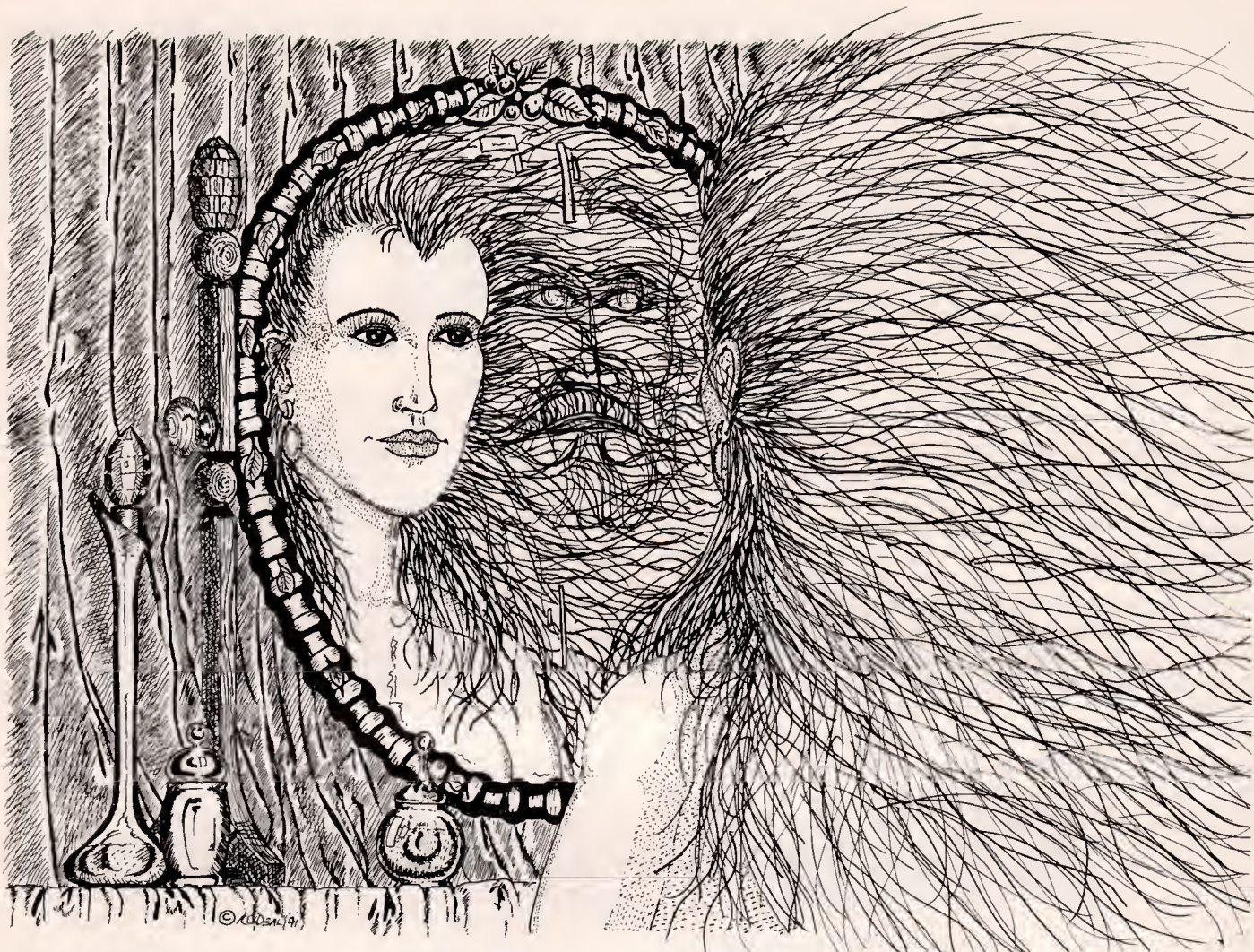
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# DO YOU LOVE?

By Jo Raine

The witch stood on the balcony of her shining tower, looking out over the sea. Dark clouds ran before the storm, their forms ever-changing, obscuring and then revealing the sickle moon. Stray moonbeams silvered the foaming surf as it crashed onto the rocks far far below her stance.

Her long black hair streamed in the wind, a dark omen-filled pennant, a raven's wing against her rose white skin.

She was waiting. Anticipation pricked her senses. With her secret knowledge she knew that he had been watching her for some time. At last it began.

"Do . . ."

The words were picked out in the boom of the surf and the rise and fall of the wind.

"Do you ..."

The wind dropped for a moment, a heartbeat of pure stillness, then a gentle breeze, warm and perfumed, brushed against her cheek, soft as a lover's kiss.

"Do you love?"

She turned aside and went back into her tower. She would not be won so easily.

For the love of the Lady she did this thing. For the love of the Lady and to avenge the betrayal of the land.

She walked in the forest. The sun was just warming the

day and morning mist was rising from the earth. A glow of old gold and copper filled the air. Ivory blossoms fell about her as she walked caressing her skin where they touched. She breathed in the smell of fresh earth and bitter woodland herbs.

The forest had never loved man, being old and wise in time. It suffered man's presence lightly and many who strayed on its paths were never more seen by mortal eyes. But she could walk its shadow ways in peace.

Stopping, she made her obeisance before the apple tree that stood alone, gnarled and twisted with age, most magical in that magical place. On its branches pink and white blossom bloomed next to fresh green apples and amber toned fruit, sweet with summer. Reaching up she plucked one of the latter and ate it as she walked, the rich juice velvet on her tongue. The core she carefully buried under a pile of leaf-mold before carrying on deeper into the woods.

Nearby was a pool of crystal clarity, deep and silent, full of secrets. Kneeling on the moss green grassy bank she leaned out over the still waters. Her reflection was rapt, entranced.

"Show me," she thought fiercely. "Show me what will be!"

A ripple ran across the water blurring her reflection, and when the waters cleared again she saw her room in the tower. It was dark, but not too dark to hide two figures



outlined by the drapes about her bed, caught in a close embrace. The picture faded and she saw an oak tree silhouetted against the sun, and then her own face, blind, drowned under the waters of the pool, weed threaded through her hair.

With a cry she jerked back, shuddering. She needed no ill omens. When she dared look again the pool was innocent, reflecting only sky. Scrambling to her feet she began to run, heedless of direction, until the incessant humming of the wind in the trees calmed her once more.

"I should have used crystal," she told herself, trying to find some comfort from the cold wind that blew through her soul. "Water is a notorious liar."

The beasts of the forest came for her blessing and some travelled with her a while before going about their own affairs. The unicorn stayed with her the longest, but even she would not step into the glade at the centre of the forest, where the great ancient oak stood atop an even older mound, the tree's roots mingling with the bones and grave goods of warriors killed in a battle when the world was young.

Here at the centre was a stillness, where the world held its breath. The trees whispered and leaned together, conspirators sharing a dream of how the world should be. There was magic here still, a magic older than man. Some called it wild magic; neither black nor white; it acted where it willed, its results unpredictable. Sometimes as she walked here she felt something touch her soul very gently, a leaf falling; the hairs on the back of her neck lifting in the age old presence of something which man could never understand, at which man must never turn around and stare.

The voice came again silencing the bird song, born out of rustling leaves and the sound of growing things.

"Do you love?"

And for a moment it seemed to her that the gnarled and pitted bark took on the form and features of a man, who gazed at her with leaf green eyes before slowly disappearing. Vines of mistletoe and honeysuckle twined about her waist in a brief embrace, one tendril playfully touching her breast before she pushed it away. It startled her that he was able to penetrate so far into a realm she had thought wholly hers, and for the first time she began to feel a little fear. After all, he was rumoured to be demon born. She must be careful not to underestimate his powers.

And as she continued her walk through the forest roses bloomed where she stepped.

Plucking a white rose with her long slender fingers she smelled its perfume before fastening it in her hair. She smiled and her eyes were the colour of dead leaves and old blood.

She sat before her mirror in her tower room; full of beautiful, old, strange things. The ornate tapestries covering its walls had once enthralled her. Now they did not merit a second glance. Her mind was elsewhere.

As the dusk grew, she lit the candles one by one, filling the room with rich amber light and the scent of beeswax. All was prepared. Taking up her golden comb she began to slide it through her hair, each movement slow and languorously deliberate, the comb sliding through her tresses with the sound of old silk tearing. When she had finished, each hair seemed to be alive, coiling and curling around her face and shoulders.

Opening her jewellery box she selected her finest emeralds and clasped a skein around her throat, the heavy jewels hanging down between her full breasts, their colour rich and startling against the pure white silk of her gown. She fastened more of the precious stones in her ears,

threading the fine gold wire through her lobes. They swung, flashing green fire as she turned her head from side to side to admire the effect.

From another box she took out pots of cosmetics - rouge to stain her lips and cheeks with ruby, gold paint to make her eyes flash and burn, kohl to darken her brows, accentuating the whiteness of her skin. Finally, from a small ornate vial, she dabbed the pulses of her wrists, her throat and between her breasts with a rare perfume made from the distilled petals of a plant that grew on a mountain at the edge of the world, and blossomed but once in a thousand years. At last she was ready for him.

The lady Morgaine had chosen her for this task; she had called her her sword of justice, finely forged and deadly. Growing up in the seclusion of the Lake community, she had been deliberately sheltered from the web of politics that Court had become. The Sisters had known her as Nimue, but now she had gone back to her true name, her secret name that no other living person knew except for the Lady Morgaine. She was no witch, but a young girl, innocent and pure, brought up to serve a purpose, with no other future. A tool, not a witch. A weapon, chosen for this desperate task, to strike a blow deep into Arthur's heart.

Under that Christian morality espoused by the queen, the Lady Morgaine had been declared renegade, and her son, who should have been the king's true heir, an abomination. That same morality allowed the Queen's continued dalliance with the knights of the court, the secret adulteries, the licentiousness, all in the name of chivalry.

He was watching her from the shadows. His eyes were on her now. She could see him in her glass, his face pale and ethereal, now old, now young, his eyes burning with the colour of the deepest ocean, of oak leaves, of emeralds.

She laughed to see him and turned the mirror to the wall.

Her purpose strengthened by her meditations, she crossed the tower room to stand by the fire where applewood, beech and cedar burned brightly. A low table, with two couches in the Roman style, was set in front of the fire. On the table there was a carafe of Burgundian wine, flanked by two silver goblets. A chess set was laid out, the game half played, the outcome still uncertain. The pieces, ivory and opal, ebony and jet, were carved in the likenesses of the great lords and ladies of the Court. The white king, sword in hand, was instantly recognisable as Arthur; child slayer, oath breaker, king. The black king was faceless, the champion not yet revealed.

Her enemy appeared out of the shadows by the fire, and leaning across the table picked up the white king's bishop. He smiled.

"A good likeness," he said, and after a moment's deliberation moved it two squares diagonally across the board.

He studied the effect and then asked, "Do you fear me?"

"No," she laughed, sitting down on the couch opposite him. She poured out the wine, a stream of liquid ruby sparkling in the firelight and picked up her goblet, sipping at it delicately.

"Perhaps you should," he said, sitting back into the shadows again, all but disappearing, the firelight finding only the strong curve of his brow, the glint of white teeth as he smiled.

"And perhaps -" she paused, as she moved the black knight, the queen's knight - a piece of unusual design, a woman riding a unicorn, the unicorn's horn of spiralling jet glistening blackly against her pale skin - across and down, neatly capturing the bishop,

"- perhaps it is you who should fear me."

The game ended inconclusively as such games often



do, half a dozen pieces still remaining on the board, their shadows thrown darkly against the wall dwarfing their human counterparts. The chess players were still gathering themselves for what was to come. Their hands touched across the board, fingers interweaving, his strong brown hand curled around her soft whiteness, her fingers curled like petals on the earth of his palm.

She shuddered, feeling his power, his magic rise through her, as his thumb traced the curve of her palm, the throb of her pulse. At last their eyes met.

"Vivienne. Do you love?"

He named her now, seeking to complete the spell, the binding. His voice was crystal and fine wine and harpstrings of pure gold, the voice of all the lovers there had ever been.

She smiled and held out her arms to him, her hands outstretched, her eyes full of dreams and the darkness of space.

He was not there, but the curtains around her bed stirred, and she saw his shadow against the fine lawn drapes, waiting for her.

He was in his prime, no longer child, no longer ancient, but firm fleshed, smooth muscles flowing under tanned skin. Tall and strong he welcomed her, and Vivienne went to him, the drapes that separated them parting at a thought.

The enchantment they wove was double edged, as was true of all high magic. The binder could become bound, the hunter snared. She had to make him believe that she was utterly under his spell, hiding her powers, her intentions until exactly the right moment, then revenge, sweet revenge would be hers.

**A**fterwards they lay together and Vivienne could sense his thoughts winding about her. He thought he had her now, his forever; her magic, her danger extinguished. His king would be pleased, he knew. Women were all the same after all. He had thought - had hoped - that she would be different. She smiled and thought him fool.

Vivienne traced a mystic sign on his brow as he slept and his eyes opened full of cold dread.

"For you, my lady Morgaine. All for you," she whispered. "All for you."

"Merlin - do you love?" she asked, lightly, her lips touching his eyes, his ears, his mouth, imprisoning his will, now blind, deaf and dumb to all but her. Her hair flowed across his body binding his limbs as she straddled him. He was helpless now, caught fast in her enchantment, the tables turned.

Sure now, she named him by his secret name.

"Taliesin - do you love?"

Bidden, he surrendered his powers to her. She drank deep and deeper still until she knew. Everything.

Revenge was a tart sweetness that set her teeth on edge. She knew that by redeeming her pledge to her mistress she had changed herself forever. The power and privileges of the Virgin could never be hers. She could never be a priestess. She could never go back to the Lake. Her Sisters there would weep for her and sing songs of mourning. There were doors that would no longer open at her touch, paths that she would no longer be able to tread. The prophecy of her eventual suicide was with her always. Even in death she would be outcast, her spirit condemned to wander the earth, prey for the Yell Hounds when the Wild Hunt was abroad. Pregnant with power, defiled beyond redemption, her face was wet with tears as she cradled the druid's head to her breast.

**I**n the forest, she walked alone, the man following after her, his face empty, eyes closed. He was a husk, a shape.

Nothing more. She knew all that he knew. She was all that he had ever been.

The animals did not greet her, the unicorn shied away at her approach and fled. She was not as she had been.

In the clearing she split the oak and the mound with a word, the ground shuddering in offence at the might of her powers. She bade the man who had once been Taliesin, the Merlin, the king's druid, to step into the crack, and then she sealed the wound she had made trapping him for all time and beyond.

She surveyed her work and knew it to be good. But as she walked away she heard his voice in the rustle of the wind, in the branches of the oak, passing from tree to tree, from flower to blade of grass, from the wind to the sea, the birds to the beasts, through all the living things in the world, and she knew the price she would have to pay would be high. She no longer smiled and her eyes were the colour of pain. It was all she would hear, everywhere, for evermore, until the last prophecy the pool had granted her came to pass.

"Vivienne. Do you love?"

"Do you love?"

"Do you . . ."

"Do . . ."

**Jo Raine is 27 and has lived in Hartlepool all her life. She trained as a librarian, but works as a database manager. Heavily involved with the BSFA, she has always been fascinated by the Arthurian Legends. This is her fourth published story and she has just finished her first novel, which is doing the rounds at the moment, and is working on her second. She has a cat called Kheira, which apparently bosses her dreadfully, and she converted to Islam three years ago.**

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# The Firing Line

by Martyn J. Fogg

**Earthdate: 14/1/56**

**Location: Oort comet cloud, 40,000 AU from the Sun.**

**I**t was a good place for a grave: dark, and silent, with only the slowly moving stars for company. Perhaps once every million years, a comet nucleus might pass nearby, but of graverobbers, there would be none. The dead ship/entity could truly rest in peace.

+ *Peripheral damage is total Tricolour / All branches are cauterised to the roots / But Far-Scan has taken deep wounds also / Both personality twins are maimed / Sentience has departed / Only scattered autonomic functions remain +*

\* *Did Far-Scan dump their anti-hydrogen \**

+ *Yes. It is dispersed / There is no danger of spontaneous self-detonation +*

\* *Then all is left to us / We shall leave Far-Scan to the eternal drift \**

**T**wo once similar ships hung together in a lonely rendezvous. One looked pristine, spiny and anemone-like, the other resembled a fused and distorted wax replica. A flot-sam of ablated debris littered the area; fragments of spiny integument, loose and tangled fibrils, and frozen gobbets of bloodlike fluid.

\* *The General War has not come this way for many Megayears \**

+ *And now the enemy has new allies / The Haters +*

\* *Allies that are out of control / With contempt for the proper conduct / For the stability / Of eternal conflict / A race too young / Too rapacious to be armed \**

+ *A mistake the enemy may learn to regret +*

\* *A mistake that we shall regret sooner / Unless their vessel is hunted down / Before they can break the Interdict \**

The Hater's exhaust trail, a tell tale scent of energetic helium ions, was still fresh, and was leading Sunward.

**Earthdate: 06/12/90**

**Location: Pasadena, California.**

**J**anet Ullman was half way through boiling an egg for her breakfast, when a clatter from her front door indicated a visit from the mail man. Even though the egg was still three minutes away from a perfect consistency, she rushed excitedly out into the hallway.

"Fantastic!" she exclaimed. "It's come at last!"

An issue of *Nature* was lying face up on the floor.

It was slightly less than a year now since *Nature* had published a paper by Welsh-Canadian palaeontologist James Potter, with the innocent sounding title 'A recent discovery of unusual *Sauromithoidid* skull fragments'.

Janet still smiled at Potter's use of the word 'unusual' - surely one of the great understatements of the century! 'Bizarre' or 'weird' might have been more appropriate, for

within Latest Cretaceous strata that had once bordered a huge internal seaway that stretched from New Mexico to Alaska, pieces of a small dinosaur, with a brain the size of a man's, had been found.

The press of course had a field day, with headlines such as 'Fossil Egghead Unearthed!' and 'Canada Claims First Intelligent Being!' As the year wore on, and further discoveries were made, newspaper blurbs became increasingly outrageous and far fetched. Janet had had her two favourite headlines framed and hung up in the bathroom: 'Brainysaurus Found With Flint Tool!' and 'Romeo and Juliet Lizards Died In Love Embrace!' Strangely enough, it took a good while for anybody to link the demise of these creatures with the increasing evidence for a violent end to the Era in which they had lived. Janet had rectified this, with a series of newspaper and magazine articles. Down market rags had insisted on titles such as 'Lizard Civilisation Blasted By Space Bomb!' whereas her feature for *Reader's Digest* had led off with a more restrained 'Dinosauroids die in cosmic catastrophe.'

Janet tore away the plastic wrapping from the latest *Nature* and opened the pages. Yes, it was there, a definitive review of the year's events by Potter, Caligo and Taylor; 'The controversy concerning *Encephalosaurus Potteri*' sounded quite refreshing after the hysteria. Impatiently, she read the abstract and started scanning through the paper itself.

"All the evidence is beginning to fit together", she muttered. "By the end of the Cretaceous, Saurian evolution had speeded up far more than we had ever thought. Given a few more millennia they would have reached our level. After that...well, they could have colonised the Solar System, then the Galaxy and would never have become extinct." Janet grinned pugnaciously, "This paper's going to help my cause considerably. Just wait, I'll crack my most hard boiled opponents..."

"Hard boiled? Oh, shit, my breakfast!"

**Earthdate: 14/10/92**

**Location: Oort Comet Cloud, Inner edge, 20,000 AU from the Sun.**

**A** chase of thirty six years was as nothing to races used to fighting millennia long battles and aeon long wars. Like chess players poised over an evenly matched end game, the two vessels stalked each other, always within sensing, just out of range, waiting for the other to take first risk.

+ *Intruder warship is now accelerating again / As we feared Tricolour / Its course changes are not random / It is definitely heading in to the inner system / There has been no response to our final challenges / We have tried all crucial and diplomatic codes / They persist in ignoring us +*

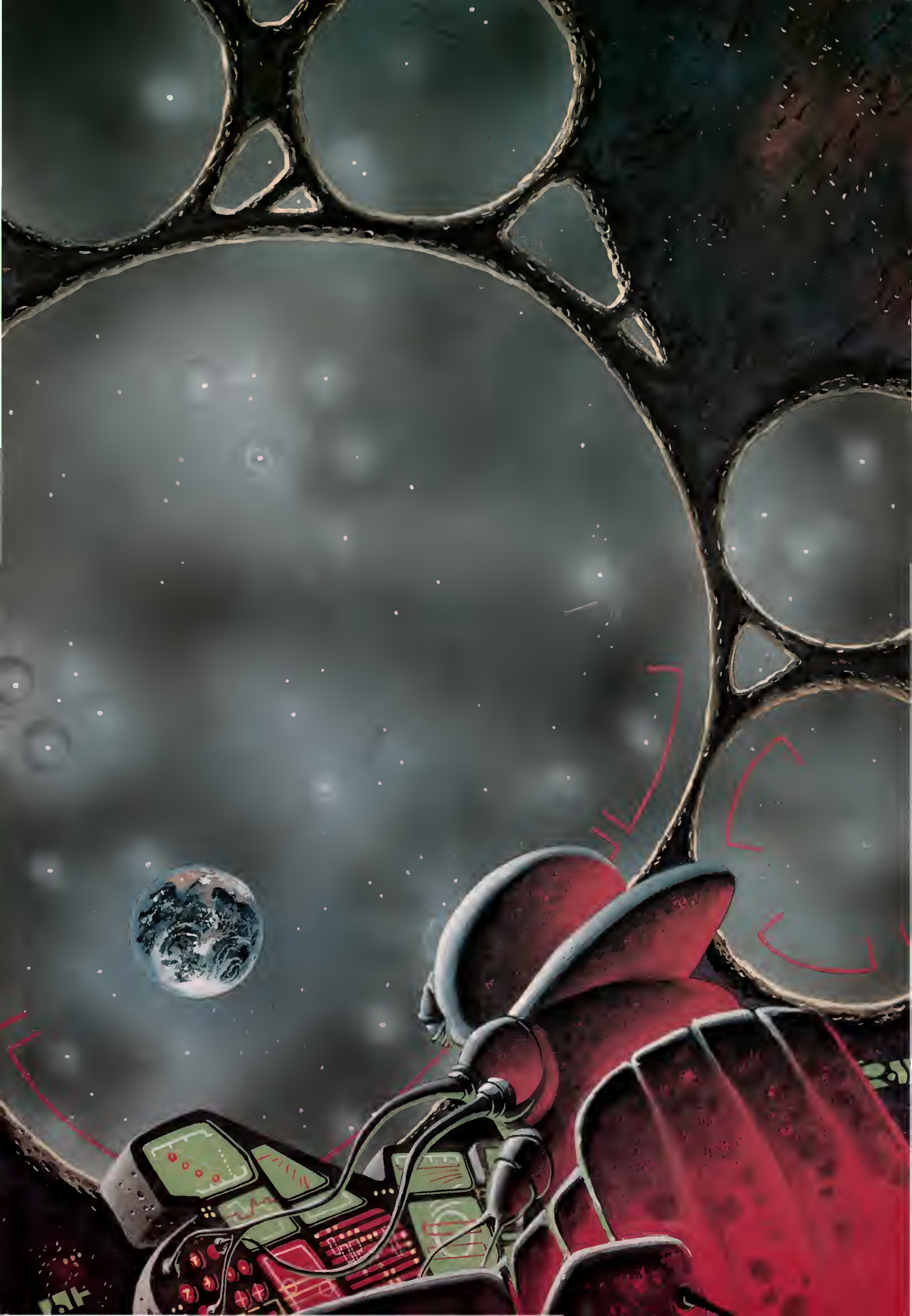
\* *The Hater performs his combat ritual well / I am reluctant All-Eyes / But the Interdict Boundary has been passed / Our duty is to Intercept / Are we prepared \**

+ *All branches, branchlets and fibrils are coordinated for attack / But ours is only a scout vessel / Our capability is doubtful +*

\* *Doubtful indeed / For it is a recognised war crime for a military vessel to enter an interdicted system / Especially this one which has suffered unlawful war damage before \**

+ *I query again / Why then are the Haters here +*







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*\* We can only speculate / An embryonic civilisation inhabits this system / Judging by their brief history / They would make prize interstellar combatants of the future / Perhaps the Haters believe that they would join our side / And plan an act of genocide / Kept secret from their own High Command \**

*+ It is frightening / That so young a race / Which itself so recently benefited from the protection of Interdict / Can countenance such a crime +*

*\* The High Commands of both sides sometimes make mistakes / In their enthusiasm to provide their forces with new warriors / Particularly immature and vicious races / Are sometimes armed and set loose / The Haters are thus a well named mistake \**

**Earthdate: 10/6/96**

**Location: Andhra Pradesh, India.**

"Well, Suresh," said Janet Ullman, tapping an outcrop of the Deccan trap rock with her hammer, "Sixty five million years ago this is where it all happened."

"What, exactly here?" Suresh Visvanathan looked up from the map he had spread over the bonnet of their jeep.

"We can't tell the exact spot, but it hit somewhere on the Deccan plateau. You've got a choice of an eighth of a million square kilometres."

"Hmm... we should be able to find a decent site if you say we have half of Southern India to choose from. The government's paying me to do a good job though; is there no way of more precisely determining the impact location? Was no crater left behind?"

"Not in this case, but the latest evidence we have from iridium anomalies is as near to proof as we're likely to get. A ten kilometre wide iron asteroid, travelling at about twenty kilometres per second, struck somewhere in this region at the end of the Cretaceous Period. The energy released was staggering - the equivalent of about thirty thousand full scale nuclear wars all going on simultaneously in the same place -"

"- I still can't get a grip on the scale of it." The man shook his head.

"It's mind boggling, I know. The missile must have fractured the crust all the way down into the mantle, leaving a zone of weakness and triggering volcanic activity that was to last several million years. There probably was an impact crater formed initially, about two hundred kilometres across, but this was long ago obliterated by the upwelling basaltic lavas that form this plateau."

"So, what you're saying is that we can justify the building of our theme park just about anywhere on the Deccan."

"That's right," Janet said. "Ask any astronomy or geology related questions you wish but don't ask me how to pack tourists in."

"That, Janet, is my job," Suresh wagged a finger. "India in the 21st century is due for a boom in tourism. I intend to make our dinosaur park the biggest, best and most realistic in the world. Life sized models, displays using the latest holographic techniques, all right on the very spot where the Mesozoic Era met its violent end."

"I wish you every success. But nobody should make the mistake of thinking that this was the only catastrophe to come from above. There have been other large impacts that have caused mass extinctions. I suppose it's not surprising though that it's the terminal Cretaceous one that captures the imagination; after all, the extermination of an intelligent species is a notion that fills us humans with par-

ticular horror."

"Other big mass exterminations? Did any other world wide disasters originate in India?"

"Not that we know of," she laughed, "everybody's heard of the wiping out of the dinosaurs, but few know that the Earth is being bombarded all the time. There is a continual bombardment of microscopic dust particles and meteors, ranging from the size of sand grains to the occasional one the size of a house. From time to time, we get plastered by a full size asteroid."

"From time to time?"

"Our studies of Earth crossing asteroids indicate that there are about four impacts greater than 1 kilometre in diameter every million years. One million years, as I'm sure you'll know, is a rather short time on the geological scale of things."

"My...I never realised there was so much rock up there waiting to fall on our heads."

"The chance of an asteroid collision destroying civilisation is small, but the fact that it has already happened in the distant past has made people wake up to what danger there is. Hopefully, we are about to do something about it. I'm involved in a forthcoming sky survey of Apollo asteroids, the most detailed yet."

Ullman contemplated the fresh, dark surface of trap rock that she had split with her hammer.

"Space is black," she said, "but if there is any stone of Damocles hanging over us, then we'll find it."

**Earthdate: 14/4/98.**

**Location: Hills Comet Cloud, 2,000 AU from the Sun.**

The time for skirmishing was over, the deciding battle had at last begun.

*+ Tricolour / Six objects have detached from the enemy ship and are closing +*

*\* Hold course / We must approach to as small a range as possible before the turn / We may only get one chance \**

*+ When we do not disable their missiles / Will they not suspect that we are unarmed+*

*\*Hate does not necessarily cloud the mind of the xenophobe / Our Clade has origins twenty galactic rotations ago / We of all races know that the importance of laws / Thus they will realise that in this system we do not carry weapons of war \**

*+ Enemy missiles have ceased accelerating and are now coasting towards us / Shall we take evasive action +*

*\* No / This would be futile / The Haters are not primitive / Their missiles are not contact or proximity fuzed explosive / But more likely xasers\**

As if cued by its words, the six objects detonated with the nova-like flare of a distant nuclear explosion. From the heart of each fireball a powerful beam of X-rays lashed out. Tricolour / All-Eyes shook violently and for a while seemed lost within a cloud of ablated vapour.

*+We are d-maged / We are d-maged / We are --*

*\*All-Eyes / Give damage report \**

*+ Heavy ablation of forw-rd skin / M-ny fibrils destroyed / Some cavities open to vacuum and le-king vital fluids / Partial blindness in short w-velength regions of the electromagnetic spectrum / Branchlet bundles in section 6 are --*

*\* Are we still able to manoeuvre \**

*+ Propulsion systems are unaffected +*

*\* Is our attack strategy still viable \**

*+ Sensor capability is still sufficient / Yttrium rods remain in place +*



*\* Then let us do what we must / Our unknowing 'prote-  
ges' on the third planet would call this the Parthian Shot \**

*+ Or a kamikaze attack +*

Trailing gas and debris like a comet, the ship/entity sped on.

*+We are now within r-nge+*

*\* Keep closing \**

*+ Enemy vessel has launched six new xasers / We are  
we-k / Another salvo may render us impotent +*

*\* Very well / Initiate offensive manoeuvre \**

Steering motors flaring, the vessel turned through 180 degrees. The yawning nozzles of its powerful main drive pointed at the enemy like the muzzles of a blunderbuss.

*\* Now they must see our plan / Before they evade / Fire  
All-Eyes Fire \**

Bundles of precisely aligned Yttrium rods were ejected into the ship/entity's reaction chamber. The drive was activated, matter and anti-matter combining, exploding, converting the rods into ephemeral columns of lasing plasma. The renegade bathed and burned in an intense pulse of hard X-rays.

*+ Enemy is elimin-ted / But their laser missiles are still  
active+*

*\* Take immediate evasive action \**

*+ We -+*

Striking as if from beyond their airless grave, the Haters' second salvo detonated.

It was a while before Tricolour could gather its weary fibres and speak. It was aware of an acceleration.

*\* I regain coordination / I still live / All-eyes report \**

*+ We-re d-m-ged / We-re d-m-ged / We see only in radio  
/ We see only in radio / Termin-I att-ck sequence initiated /  
Termin-I att-ck sequence initiated +*

*\* Give damage report \**

All-eyes repeated his idiot's message. The dying personality twin could no longer hear Tricolour. It had noticed a new enemy with what little was left of sight. Its drives flaring power, it turned, setting a new course.

**Earthdate: 3/7/99, 12:10 pm**

**Location: JPL, California.**

Ullman was pleasantly surprised to see that the panel discussion on Project Skywatch was well attended. The auditorium was about three quarters full, mostly it seemed with media people.

Paul Ho, her deputy, had been dealing with the questions so far. In his characteristic dead-pan style, he described the telescopes being used by the project, explaining that their acronym VOR meant 'Vast Orbiting Reflector.'

"May I say," Janet cut in, "that the name is actually very appropriate. VOR was a minor Nordic goddess who the legends say had extraordinary powers of sight."

Microphones and cameras swivelled in her direction.

"So these space telescopes of yours are little more than huge orbiting blimps?" someone said, more in the way of a statement than a question.

"That is a simplification Sir, but not a bad one. The functional part of the telescope does indeed have very little rigid support. It is essentially a bag of thin mylar film, but tailored very precisely, so that when inflated it takes up the exact shape we want. As you can see," she stabbed a thumb at the projection of a VOR on the screen behind the podium, "a section of the mylar is aluminised; that's our fifty metre parabolic mirror."

"What's the advantage of these things over more con-

ventional telescopes?" A shout came from the back.

"There are both advantages and disadvantages. A VOR telescope is extremely lightweight and can be launched in a compact form, fitting easily in a shuttle cargo bay. When inflated, it grows to a huge size offering immense light gathering power at much less cost. The optics of a VOR are however, for obvious reasons, markedly inferior to those of a conventional telescope with a solid mirror.

"You may ask why Project Skywatch has chosen this system. We aim to complete the most comprehensive survey of Apollo asteroids yet undertaken. We think we have already detected all the big ones there are up there. It's the small ones we need to find, and for that we need big mirrors to search for faint objects; image quality is not so important."

"Dr Ullman, could you please explain the term Apollo asteroids to my viewers?"

"Ah, yes. An Apollo asteroid is one that crosses the orbit of the Earth. They are our near neighbours in the Solar System, if you like."

"What makes them so important that American and European taxpayers have to pay for you to catalogue them?"

"Two reasons. The first is economic: our moon colony currently has to import nitrogen and water from the Earth at great expense; mining an Apollo asteroid for these volatiles could be much cheaper. The second reason is a more sinister one: we know from the geological record that the Earth's past has been chequered by collisions with previous populations of Apollo asteroids; in some cases, the resulting explosion wiped out a substantial fraction of the planet's biota. Skywatch has thus two purposes, to further explore near Earth space, and to provide our civilisation with an ample warning of disaster. Had Dinosauroid civilisation developed such a capability, it might just have saved them."

Janet handed back the reins of the discussion to her colleagues. Ho and Meissner began to outline the project's discoveries to date; a very pleasing start, sixteen new asteroids in two months...

She relaxed into her chair and allowed herself the luxury of observing the audience. One man in the front row seemed to stand out, for instead of looking at the current speakers, he seemed to be sitting on the edge of his seat and peering at her intently. He looked familiar, wait a minute ... yes. It was Jack 'pain up the ass' Foster, the hack pseudo-science writer, a frequent, and less than popular, attendee of space conferences. Apparently the man had a PhD, but nobody seemed to know what in or where from. The consensus of opinion was that it was one of those \$500 mail order jobs; expensive toilet paper, people called them. His writing was dire, his reputation shady, but this had not stopped his latest book *"What The Saucers Can Tell Us"* from making him a million dollars. Whatever you thought about Foster though, you did have to concede one thing, the man had an admirable strength of character; he remained utterly serene and persistent in the face of the most vicious criticism. At a carefully chosen moment he would strike back; his disruptive, and usually crass, comments, calculated for maximum embarrassment.

"I have a couple of questions for Doctor Ullman." Foster stood up, seizing his chance. Janet inwardly cringed.

"I am not yet clear," he continued, "about the size and velocity brackets of objects that the VOR telescopes can detect."

"A good question," said Janet, relieved. "We aim to be able to detect objects about fifty metres across and larger, with a reflectivity as low as three per cent, travelling at a velocity relative to the Earth of up to seventy kilometres per second."

"Only seventy?"



"Seventy is good enough, *Doctor Foster*," she frowned. "Apollo asteroids that are a danger to the Earth would only impact at about twenty kilometres per second. In the worst case, an object in a retrograde commentary orbit, about to hit the Earth head on, would hit at seventy."

"Ahh," Foster wagged his finger, "what if there is something faster out there? With kinetic energy increasing with the square of velocity, a tiny object could make one hell of a bang."

"Flights of fantasy again...."

Janet noticed the auditorium was silent, waiting for an answer. The irritating sonofabitch hadn't sat down. Oh God, how humiliating!

"Perhaps our expert on the paranormal would care to illuminate the world's press, on what this remarkable object might be," she said acidly.

"Oh, I don't know," he shrugged his shoulders, "an interstellar comet, maybe even a flying saucer!"

The focus of attention had now obviously shifted from the podium to the front row. Foster had done it again, another press meeting hijacked by his invocation of the absurd. Goddammit, she thought, why are science correspondents so.... so *mercenary*?

"Doctor Foster," one journalist was earnestly saying, "are you telling us that Skywatch has a loophole, that it leaves us open to UFO invasion?"

"Next question please!" Janet shouted.

**Earthdate: 3/7/99**

**Location: Crossing the orbit of Mars, 1.5 AU from the Sun.**

**T**ricolour's extremities were withered and gangrenous with despair, yet its core remained conscious. It knew that death would not be long in coming, but this was as nothing compared to the appalling crime that was about to take place. It had wanted to die; there was no nobler an act than that of a member of one of the most ancient of Clades sacrificing its existence for the well being of a new sentient race, young and still ignorant of the galactic whole.

But now, what perversity! Now it was the ship/entity that would shortly accomplish what the Haters had intended. The damage to its half of the shared brain had caused All-Eyes to retreat to the nucleus of its being, to a place beyond hearing or reason. Here was a dark comfort; whether it was instinct, or some long buried program, none can say, but All-Eyes knew that it gave its impending extinction meaning. The personality twin was almost blind, but a faint fuzz of radio waves was still visible. Another enemy!

By burning all the fuel tanks dry, the ship/entity was now speeding towards its target at one tenth light speed. This was the terminal attack sequence: a bolt of irresistible, pent-up kinetic energy, a final multi-Gigaton blaze of glory. The end was close; a red and dusty planet hurtled past, swelling and then shrinking rapidly to a point in their wake. Ahead, another Hater vessel, a bluish starry object, was rapidly brightening.

*\*All-Eyes / Change your course / Or relinquish control to me \**

Tricolour's vibrations were weak and futile.

*\* Your target is not an enemy ship / It is the Earth \**

**Earthdate: 3/7/99, 13:13 pm**

**Location: JPL, California.**

**I**t was an hour later, and Janet Ullman was sitting in a secluded corner in the canteen, hoping nobody would no-

tice her. She hated displaying her anger and was determined to deny Foster the final humiliation of an emotional outburst. The crank had disrupted the whole of the second half of the meeting with an impromptu lecture to the press on; 'Flying saucers are hostile,' obviously a pre-planned gimmick to publicise a forthcoming book. It had been an impossible situation; she could neither leave, nor order Foster to be expelled, without losing face. The swine!

"Doctor Ullman?" It was that voice again! Janet choked back her hot tea.

"Foster! What the hell do you want now?"

"I'm sorry if you feel I harmed your presentation," a pained, fraudulent look of sincerity was on his face. "I was only trying to make a simple point. The fact is that if a relatively small object, the mass of a naval destroyer say, were to impact the Earth at a substantial fraction of lightspeed, it could cause as much damage as an Apollo asteroid millions of times more massive."

Janet stood up; the Krakatoa-like rage boiling up within her was about to burst.

"Ullman," Foster looked alarmed, taking a step backwards, "just because science has ignored the extraterrestrial hypothesis for mass extinctions doesn't mean that -"

Foster never managed to finish his plea, and Janet never got to deliver her haymaker. Both were flashed to ionised vapour, mingling in a hypersonic shock front with the atoms of half of California.

Titanic earthquakes and mountainous tidal waves convulsed the globe. Burning gales of molten rock swept the continents. Cities flared incandescent, like books in a blast furnace, and were gone. Civilisation belched its last breath, as immense columns of smoke rose into the stratosphere.

**Earthdate: 65 million years after man.**

**Location: Hrweejit Plateau, America.**

**W**ell Chitree," said Oomrit, tapping the Californian trap rock with her hammer, 'sixty five million years ago, this is where it all happened.'

"What, exactly here?" Chitree looked up.

"That's right. A great civilisation inhabited the Earth then, and was wiped out in only one day."

"Completely wiped out?"

"Yes. We have measured an iridium enrichment in the rocks from this time that suggests that the cause was a collision between the Earth and an iron asteroid."

"Did they really all die in one day?"

"Not quite. Their colonists on the moon survived a little before becoming extinct. Fortunately the records they left us on the moon were good enough to be of interest to archaeologists as well as paleontologists. It appears that their science was sophisticated and yet strangely they were not able to detect the object that was to destroy them -"

"- which is, of course, fortunate for us."

"Fortunate indeed. Rodents, especially our rattish ancestors, were considered by them to be vermin, just as the primates are now considered by us."

"Any primate race must have been lacking in true intelligence."

"Well, they certainly were unwise. Our space scientists are conducting a thorough survey of Earth crossing asteroids, so that such a calamity does not happen to us..." Oomrit's conversation tailed off. He lifted a hind leg to scratch behind his ears.

"You're itching to tell me something, aren't you?" Chitree said.

"Well yes... There is one other thing."

"What?"



"Well. You understand this isn't official yet -"  
 "Yes yes, go on."  
 "There's been another skeleton discovered on the moon, and it's not primate."  
 "What... you mean... surely not an alien?"  
 "We don't think so: it was some sort of large brained reptile, and much, much older."  
 "Ihh," Chitree wheezed with excitement, "that's incredible, it's revolutionary! The primate race may only have been -"  
 "- the *second* intelligent species to inhabit the Earth, I know. Asteroid impacts are obviously a far more important factor in evolution than hitherto recognised. That's why I believe Project Rockwatch to be one of the most worthwhile activities of our race."  
 "Something both primate and reptile lacked the foresight to accomplish!"  
 "Or the care. The Universe is a risky place to live in if you lack imagination and don't take precautions."

**Earthdate: 65 million years after Man.**  
**Location: The Interdict Boundary. 32,000 AU from the Sun.**

The decimated Tua fleet had its course firmly set, a dive deep into the the gravity well of the yellow star ahead. The colossal flagship *Luxon Mirror* had taken only superficial damage, the brunt of the battle having been shouldered by scores of limping Clade Confederate escorts.

Certainly, its bridge, deeply buried under two kilometres of rock and metal, was unharmed. The crew was hard at work, external organs interfaced with *Luxon's* multicomputer, searching for any sign of K'tictinni pursuit. All were quite properly oblivious to a raging conflict in their midst. The Tua Chief Jurist had just completed his ritual dance of protest.

*<I object most strongly Clade Marshal. We are about to flagrantly breach Galactic Law. This is an Interdicted system. We must not enter it.>*

The Clade Marshal rearranged his external organs in a gesture of dismissal.

*<<Official, now is not the time for a legal lecture / Our survival is at stake.>>*

*<Marshal, this is a Category One war crime!>*

*<<A crime is only a crime if we are caught in the act / We are out of sensor range and are thus not under observation. Moreover, the K'tictinni are legal sticklers, our trajectory may lie beyond their imagination.>>*

*<Our pursuers may not be watching, but we have almost certainly been spotted / After a second incidence of illegal war damage whilst this system was within the territory of the Ship/entity Clade, its Interdict Boundary was sewn with millions of sensors ->*

*<<Silence civilian! We shall see who is punished for war crimes after the K'tictinni are ambushed and routed!>>*

The jurist continued to whine, *<There will be no ambush Marshal, the enemy will know / An embryonic civilisation inhabits this system; have you thought of the consequences if we are pursued and innocents are caught in the firing line. I for one will have no choice but to report your conduct to... Marshal, no ->*

With a hissing crack of flash heated body fluids, the Jurist's thorax split open, cutting his tirade off in mid flow.

The Clade Marshal re-pocketed his maser and beckoned to an orderly.

*<<Take the body of this weakling and dump it in a damaged outer compartment.>>*

*[How should I docket the cause of death?]*

The marshal's expression approximated to that of a smile. *<<Innocent civilian caught in the firing line>>, he said.*

**Martyn Fogg is a science writer and part time lecturer in Astronomy and Planetary Science with the Department of Extra-Mural studies, Birbeck College, University of London. His particular research interests have included planetary formation and evolution, SETI, cometary impact cycles, blue stragglers, interstellar planets and terraforming.**

**He has been contributing Editor of two special issues of the "Journal of the British Interplanetary Society" devoted to terraforming and is a quasi-regular contributor to the *Analog* "Science Fact" column.**

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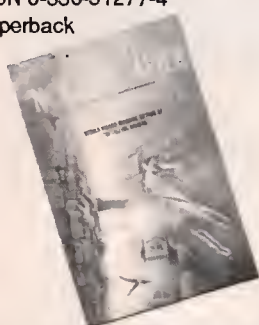


# NEW BOOKS

These pages detail the new books we've received at FAR POINT. Space obviously prevents us giving a full review to every one, so these pages simply provide you with the publisher's blurb and the details you'll need if you want to get hold of a copy. Full reviews of some of them will appear in future issues; this month's reviews start on page 64.

## THE CITY, NOT LONG AFTER

Pat Murphy  
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We don't have to kill Fourstar's soldiers. All we have to do is change their minds . . . Let's think of this war as an art project' The city - home of pale ghosts and chattering monkeys - where Danny-boy the artist, and the nameless young woman, who carries a warning from the countryside, must lead the small band of survivors. Lead them into a bloodless battle in a world with little enough blood left to spill.

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huge success - a marauding Wolfpack destroyed, and first contact established with an extra-terrestrial civilisation.

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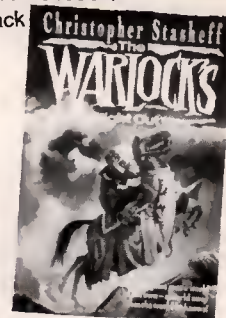
Confined to Earth base Edwards, Nicole adapts reluctantly to her new diplomatic role - until she finds out that someone is trying to kill her . .

The defeated raiders have not forgotten Lt. Shea - and neither have the alien Halyan'ta!

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Jack L Chalker

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Back in Husaquahr, the other world, after the brief sojourn on Earth, Joe expected to pick up his life and go on, pretty much the same. He should have known better.

To begin with, the evil Dark Baron had managed to escape and had teamed up in the far north with the Master of the Dead. Alone, either was a disaster; together, they were potential catastrophe.

There were also some changes for which Joe wasn't prepared. He'd accepted the fact that his beloved Tiana now had the body of an exotic dancer. But then he discovered that she was a slave with a growing slave mindset - and would always be a slave.

Worst of all, Joe discovered that there had been some highly unwelcome changes in *him*. In all literal truth, he could no longer call his soul his own - because it wasn't!

## THE RING OF CHARON

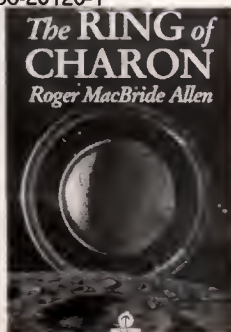
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Hardback



Science is toil and hard work - except when it verges on miracle. When Larry O'Shawnessy Chao manages to harness the giant Ring of Charon, orbiting Pluto's only moon, to control a field of over one million gravities, he feels a touch of the miraculous...

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In a secret experiment, Larry and a colleague conspire to leak the discovery to scientists around the solar system. Their success is unprecedented. But no one knows of the entity hidden in Earth's Moon, waiting for a signal - a signal tripped by Larry's innocent gravity-wave

demonstration.

No one knew that signal would then tell the aliens it was time to vanish the Earth.

## WAR OF THE MAELSTROM

Jack L Chalker

New English Library

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Robert E Vardeman

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The golden key glowed darkly, the inset gem flashing green fire. Inscribed runes spelled out a promise beyond belief. The Key to Paradise. A promise and a quest.

Giles Grismate, world-wandering survivor of the Trans Wars, had won it fairly in a game of chance. The second key - along with a goodly haul of coin - had been stolen from a rich merchant by Keja Tchurak, master thief.

And when they set out for the invisible Gates of Paradise, Petia, half-cat, half-woman, tracked them with silent night-skills.

Yet to enter Paradise, three more keys were needed.

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There had been war - a war which the great world-spanning empire

of Chung Kuo had survived. But at a cost.

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David Wingrove

New English Library

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The brutal 'War of the Two Directions' - between the rulers and the ruled - takes on a new fever pitch of intensity as the Seven's arch-enemy, DeVore, links up with the terrorist Ping Tiao to try to bring the City down. But he has not reckoned with the tenacity of his opponents, particularly of the young prince, Li Yuan, who, as the pace of events increases, finds himself swept along by the tide of Change which must - and will - transform the world into which he was born.

## QUOZL

Alan Dean Foster

New English Library

ISBN 0-450-55185-7

Paperback



The Quozl knew they'd love the third planet out from the sun.

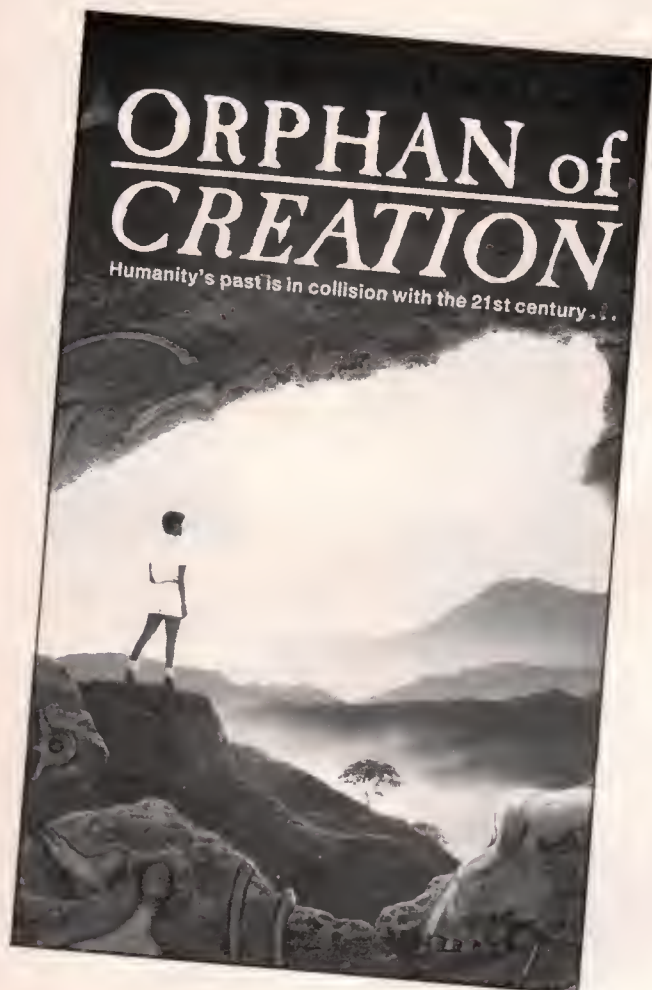
It never really occurred to them that anyone might already live there...





# BOOK REVIEWS

In each issue of FAR POINT we'll be having a closer look at some of the new or forthcoming SF and Fantasy releases. This month Bryan Hunter and John Hendry are our guest reviewers.



## Orphan of Creation

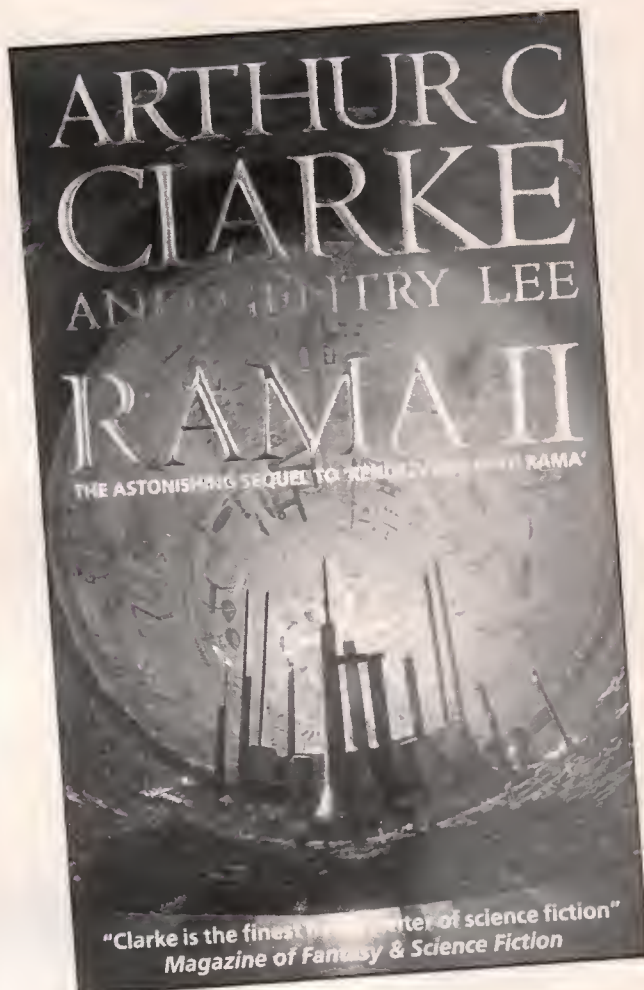
Author: Roger MacBride Allen  
 Publisher: Orbit  
 Price: Not available  
 ISBN: 0-7088-4959-8  
 Paperback

Paleontologist Dr Barbara Marchando returns to the family home in the backwoods of Mississippi for a Thanksgiving weekend and makes a startling discovery. Buried in the grounds of the house, formerly the home of a plantation owner, she finds several skeletons of a creature thought to be extinct for a million years. This leads her and her colleagues to mount an expedition to the jungles of western Africa in search of the creature.

The first couple of chapters set a good pace for the story and provide a degree of anticipation, but then the description of the discovery and subse-

quent unearthing of the bones is given in meticulous detail and some of the momentum is lost. Several chapters are taken up describing the setting out and clearing of the burial site (in fact a diagram of the burial site is included in one chapter), and it begins to read a little like an archaeological text book. Once past this, the story picks up again and reaches its true theme, the moral dilemma posed by the discovery. Allen uses his characters to explore that which makes humans different from related species and tries to discover where the division between human and non-human lies. He also takes a swipe at the creationists (those that believe that the world, and all on it, was created in 4004 B.C.), both in the story and as an Author's note at the end of the book. Not much SF in the story, but otherwise a well written book with an interesting tale.

Bryan Hunter



## Rama II

Authors: Arthur C. Clarke and Gentry Lee  
 Publisher: Orbit  
 Price: £4.99  
 ISBN: 0-7088-4826-5  
 Paperback

In 2200, only seventy years after man's first encounter with an alien spacecraft, a second craft is discovered on the same course through the Solar System. This vehicle appears to be identical to the first, and once again an Earth ship and crew are readied to intercept and explore it. The spacecraft, like its predecessor, is a huge slowly spinning cylinder whose landscape is spread out on the inner surface and is held there by centrifugal force. The initial explorations of the crew appear to show that the spacecraft is identical to the previous one, but subsequent investigations reveal some interesting differ-

ences. As the crew struggle to understand the cylinder and its contents, the craft changes course and adds a frightening new dimension to the mission.

The story of the encounter and exploration of the first spacecraft was told in Arthur C. Clarke's *Rendezvous with Rama*, published some eighteen years ago. Now an account of the second coming is told in *Rama II*, the sequel to *Rendezvous*. It is unavoidable with a sequel that comparisons will be made with the original, so how does *Rama II* compare with its predecessor? Inevitably some of the original excitement has gone out of the idea of a vast alien spacecraft apparently unoccupied by its creators, wandering through the Cosmos, controlled only by automatic systems, but Clarke and Lee manage to bring a degree of freshness to the idea. The story is typical of the SF that Arthur C. Clarke excels at,



the situations are believable, the technology is reasonable and he does not stray into fantasy. The characters are an interesting bunch with plenty of background, and are an authentic mix of good and evil as in real life, and the science is flawless, with no obvious anomalies. This of course is to be expected with

these two writers, Clarke the acknowledged master of SF and Gentry Lee who has held such lofty posts with NASA as Director of Mission Planning for Viking landers and Chief Engineer on Project Galileo, a delayed mission to rendezvous with Jupiter and its moons.

At the end of *Rendezvous*

with Rama, many questions were left unanswered, *Rama II* answers some of these questions, but still leaves the reader wishing for more. No doubt all will be revealed, (well perhaps not all), in *The Garden of Rama* and *Rama Revealed*, two sequels promised for the near future. *Rendezvous with Rama*

was extremely well received and was awarded virtually every major SF award, including the Nebula, the British SF award and the Hugo. It is unlikely that the sequel will be as popular as the original, but this remains to be seen. I certainly enjoyed reading this book and would thoroughly recommend it.

Bryan Hunter

## THE HEMINGWAY HOAX

Author: Joe Haldeman  
Publisher: New English Library  
Price: £3.99  
ISBN: 0-450-55195-4  
Paperback

Paris, 14th December 1921. Hadley Richardson, Ernest Hemingway's first wife, steps off her train in the Gare de Lyon to buy something to read. When she returns, her overnight bag - containing the original manuscripts and carbons of many of Hemingway's unpublished early stories - has vanished. They are never seen again.

Key West, 3rd June 1996. John Baird, academic, meets con-man Sylvester Castlemaine in a run-down bar. Baird is researching the missing Hemingway stories, and Castlemaine spots a chance to get rich. Gradually he talks Baird into attempting to forge the missing stories, realising they will command enormous prices at auction. Together with Baird's wife Lena, they put together a con.

However, a revival of interest in Hemingway is about to contribute in a small but critical way to an over-development of the macho tradition of the American national character, which will in turn lead ultimately to superpower confrontation and nuclear holocaust. This knowledge is the preserve of a group of beings whose purpose is to maintain stability across countless parallel universes. As the effects of the hoax spread across them all, Baird comes to the beings' atten-

tion and they dispatch one of their number to stop or kill him.

The Hemingway Hoax is a snappy, meticulously researched but ultimately irrelevant gallop through Hemingway's life and work, several dimensions and half-a-dozen familiar SF themes. Haldeman handles the plot deftly, with the strong characterisation and easy feel for late-20th Century life that marked his earlier works. Violence, from his pen, seems all too clearly to be the true way of things; one of the closing scenes pivots around a multiple shooting that is described in minute but not gloating detail, and which leaves disturbing after-images.

Baird's encounters with

the trans-dimensional assassin are cast in the familiar mode of 'ordinary bloke out-gunned by powerful Nasty fights back', and so his defiance rapidly engages our sympathy and support. Cata-pulted across the dimensions, he finds parallel Bairds, Lenas and Castlemaines setting up their hoaxes in each one. But Haldeman keeps the nature of the 'real' universe close to his chest - so close, in fact, that you might easily miss it. And satisfyingly, the plot is neatly resolved by a clever twist on a well-established SF idea. In fact, in many ways the whole book works rather like that: take an overnight bag full of SF themes which someone has left lying around and

see what you can make of them. But Haldeman is too fly an operator simply to unload on us a couple of old plots with new hats on; it's an immensely enjoyable read, and works - appropriately enough - on a number of parallel tracks.

A few details didn't quite ring true. The book's tone falters with the first appearance of the assassin in our reality; it's as if Haldeman suddenly tried to be Vonnegut, for he addresses the reader directly - one of the very few times he does so - and it grates. Baird's death at the hands of his pursuer thrusts him from universe to universe without any loss of self-awareness. Fine; but he leaves behind all he knows (including the much-loved but faithless Lena) with hardly a thought. True, both Baird's aspects integrate themselves seamlessly (a handy plot device) but the character is too well-drawn otherwise for this disinterest in his past to be credible.

Haldeman cutely states in his "Afterword" that "any errors of fact are the result of my own ignorance or laziness, and are probably not errors in some dimension". Neat. I'm not really enough of a Hemingway scholar to stick my neck out, but if you're one of those, like Baird, for whom 'Papa' is a specialisation, an enthusiasm or an obsession then I think you'll find little to carp at in this book. If you're not, then you'll probably just enjoy it. I did.

John Henry

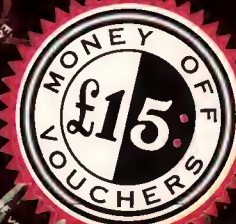




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